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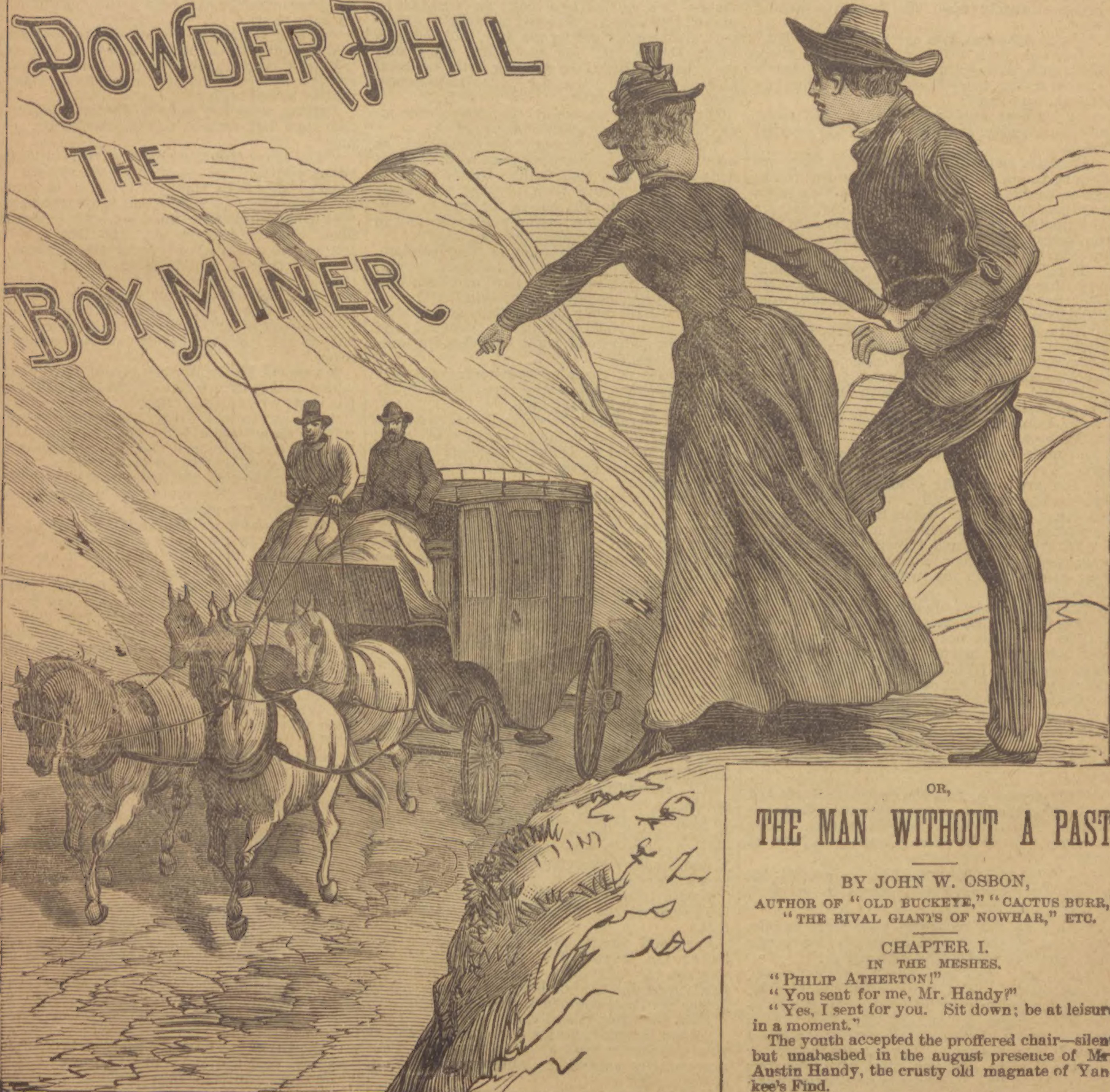
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POWDER PHIL

THE
BOX MINER



"SEE—SEE, PHIL! IT IS SHARPER HIDEFAST, THE MURDERER OF MY BROTHER!"

OR,
THE MAN WITHOUT A PAST.

BY JOHN W. OSBON,
AUTHOR OF "OLD BUCKEYE," "CACTUS BURR,"
"THE RIVAL GIANTS OF NOWHAR," ETC.

CHAPTER I.
IN THE MESHES.

"PHILIP AERTHERON!"
"You sent for me, Mr. Handy?"
"Yes, I sent for you. Sit down; be at leisure
in a moment."

The youth accepted the proffered chair—silent
but unabashed in the august presence of Mr.
Austin Handy, the crusty old magnate of Yan-
kee's Find.

A good-looking fellow, was this young gold-
seeker, Philip Atherton—full six feet in height.

broad-shouldered, and clean-limbed, a picture of robust health.

A fine head was his, too, crowned with short, crisply-curling locks of dark-brown—a good face, with clear, strong features, lighted up by a pair of big, honest, dark-gray eyes.

His attire was of gray corduroy, with a light sombrero and stout, serviceable boots—all inexpensive, but neat and fitting well his symmetrical form. Belted to his waist were a pair of solid, thoroughly reliable revolvers—indispensable adjuncts to a man's "toilet" in this Montana gold-camp of Yankee's Find.

In direct and striking contrast to the young miner was Austin Handy—a man of five-and-fifty, thoroughly well dressed, pale and slender, not above five-feet-five, with a massive head that seemed almost out of proportion to his wiry, attenuated body. Hair and beard were perfectly white, and cropped close; eyes, steel blue, clear and piercing. Curt of speech, cold, shrewd, exacting—a driver of hard bargains, yet reputed scrupulously honest—a man known as one in whose eyes the *law* was supreme.

He sat at his desk in the office of the Bonanza King Mine, a pen held nervously between his fingers, poring over a long column of figures—to all appearances wholly oblivious of the presence of young Phil Atherton.

Five—ten—fifteen minutes dragged slowly by in oppressive silence; then the magnate wheeled abruptly upon his patiently-waiting visitor.

"Philip Atherton, you are a promising lad," he observed, in a brisk, matter-of-fact tone; "but you're poor—poor as poverty, and there's no use in trying to overlook the fact. Now, to be frank, isn't it so?"

"I am a poor man—aside from a clean name and robust health, Mr. Handy," quietly averred Philip.

"Exactly, and will likely so remain for years to come, young man, for the road to wealth lies high above the level. It is only by long years of arduous toil and strictest economy that our most ambitious young men can secure upon it a firm foothold. The great majority of them fail and drop back into the ranks."

"True," briefly assented the youth, flushing and paling by turns, yet meeting the almost insolent gaze of the magnate with steady, wondering eyes.

"In the light of these facts," continued Austin Handy, a brusque, choppy strain creeping into his tones, "you will admit, I suppose, that it is preposterous for such a fellow as you to aspire to the hand of a lady of wealth and position? You understand me?"

"No, I do not," was the response, in a slightly puzzled tone.

The mine-owner shrugged his narrow shoulders.

"You are unusually obtuse to-day, Atherton," he observed, crustily. "You force me to put your case under heroic treatment—to use very plain words in a delicate matter."

"What I have been trying to get through your head is just this: You must cease paying your attentions to my ward and niece, Miss Della Handy."

Philip's face paled, his gray eyes flashed.

"Pardon me!" he exclaimed, leaning forward a trifle. "I was not aware that my actions were being misconstrued—that there was anything more than friendship between Miss Handy and myself. I did not even court that—"

"Quite true," cut in Handy, peremptorily. "You saved her from insult at the hands of those two ruffians—no more, no less, than any man with a grain of gallantry would have done—and in her girlish eyes you were at once a hero."

"It is true, too, that you declined all reward for baffling the scoundrels. But these facts are neither here nor there, in this matter. Your intimacy with Della Handy must cease, and at once!"

His handsome face bloodless as marble, his gray eyes glowing, Philip leaped to his feet, crying:

"Sir, I do not recognize your right to take this step! There is nothing in my conduct or my character warranting such action!"

"Tut! tut! you are showing your temper, young man," chided the magnate, petulantly. "I don't wonder your associates call you Powder Phil—you're up and off like a flash! It is for the best interests of all parties concerned that I have spoken. I have given the matter mature thought, and you must give over your attentions to Miss Handy or quit my employ and leave the camp."

There was a hard, metallic ring in Austin

Handy's voice. With the last words, he arose and confronted the young man.

"So be it!" calmly replied the latter, steadily and fearlessly meeting the mine-owner's frigid gaze. "I have not and shall not thrust myself upon the notice of Miss Handy. Neither, sir, shall I leave the camp! I was among its pioneers, and here shall I remain. There is room for us both!"

A scowl settled upon the mine-owner's face. But he curbed his passion with an iron hand. He pointed to the door.

"Insolent! Out of my office!"

With a curt nod, Powder Phil obeyed the imperious command.

On the threshold he passed a tall, dark-looking man of thirty, at sight of whom Austin Handy's face underwent a peculiar change.

"Ah! Major Jordan, I am more than pleased to see you!" he exclaimed, with a grim smile, as he closed the door. "You are just the man I wanted to see! Sit down—sit down!"

"Don't care if I do," coolly returned Major Jordan, helping himself to the nearest chair.

"But, I say, Handy, what's the rub between you and that con founded gutter-snipe, Powder Phil? Has he nailed his colors to the mast, or has—"

An impatient gesture interrupted the speaker.

"Your surmise is correct," enunciated Handy, sharply. "The hot-headed young fool won't budge—he's as firm as a rock! and the fact is, major, I'm strongly tempted to break our compact, do what is right by the boy, and defy you to do your worst! For the life of me, I can't see what is gained by stealing with one hand and paying you dollar for dollar hush-money with the other!"

Major Jordan stared at the mine-owner incredulously, an evil smile on his red lips.

"Oh! come now, Frosty!" he exclaimed, as his victim met his mocking gaze with a look of defiance. "Your head hain't screwed on right at all! Here you've been playing your leetle game right up to the handle for ever so many years, to drop it now, when you've one foot in the grave! Getting pious, are you, or—"

"Enough of that!" broke in the magnate, irascibly. "You've got me in your power, Jordan, and you've got me hard and fast; but, you can't press me beyond a certain limit!"

"I've fought your fight in this matter a deal further than you'd a right to demand, and I want it understood right here that I'm done with the game!"

The tones of the mine-owner were of deadly earnestness—his keen blue eyes were fairly searching in their angry gaze.

As well might he have stormed at a rock! He was in the toils of a villain as pitiless as death!

Jordan leaned far back in his chair, laughing softly, eyeing his victim with a look of unutterable contempt.

"I reckon you've cobwebs in your garret, Frosty!" he uttered softly, suddenly leaning forward with a cocked revolver in his hand. "Just sit down there! There are two or three little circumstances I want to recall to your mind!"

Austin Handy mutely obeyed.

CHAPTER II.

POWDER PHIL MUST DIE.

An ordinary-looking personage was this Major Jordan—by no means the man one would single out as the possessor of either desperate courage or extraordinary shrewdness.

On the contrary, he was rather a meek, guileless-appearing fellow, strongly built, and fairly well dressed in plain black cloth with patent-leather boots, silk hat and snowy linen.

His smoothly-shaven face was decidedly handsome, so far as a fresh, ruddy complexion and features smooth and regular count; but at times an expression so evil, cruel and vindictive as to transform him for the moment into a Mephistopheles went far to mar the almost perfect work of nature.

Austin Handy was the only person in Yankee's Find who had as yet discovered this latter fact.

For a full minute after sinking into a seat before the muzzle of Major Jordan's leveled weapon, the mine-owner's keen eyes remained fixed upon the face of his tormentor, a crafty glitter just noticeable in their blue depths.

Then he shifted uneasily, and said:

"I am listening, Major Jordan. Proceed, as your precious words may be interrupted. I am momentarily expecting Dahlgren, the captain of the Vigilantes."

"Ah! more money-bags in transit? By Jove! Old Frosty, you tempt to try my hand as a

gentlemanly toll-taker!" observed Jordan, with an odd sort of smile.

"But, after all, it might be an unprofitable undertaking—if you've taken warning by past events and called in Dahlgren and his men to see you through to Golden Flats with the bullet."

"But jesting aside. Let's get right down to business, and see what we can fish up from the deep sea of memory that will be of interest or of profit on this auspicious occasion."

"Deep waters first, is my style. We'll go back to the beginning."

"Isn't it a fact, Frosty, that you at one time—years and years ago—live in a little hamlet known as Georgetown, 'way off in Ohio?"

Austin Hardy stared blankly at the frowning muzzle of the weapon, and ground his teeth in fruitless rage. He knew what was coming. He had answered that same question before, coming from the same source. But there was death in the dark eyes gleaming over the length of the revolver, and with a smothered oath the mine-owner grunted out:

"Confound it! yes—you know I did."

The major laughed softly—insolently.

"Don't get excited, Frosty," he murmured. "Bear your burden lightly—for you've got it to bear!"

"But, that is all I care to ask about, just now; the past has been recalled to you, and for the present we'll leave your grim skeleton locked in its closet."

"It is of the future I most desire to speak, and if you're agreed we'll sail in the Elephant."

Utterly cowed, pallid and trembling as if confronted by some horrible apparition, Handy mutely bowed his head.

Putting away his weapon, Jordan went on in the same half-earnest, half-jocular strain, saying:

"You know that the object of this deal between you and me is, on my part, to gain the hand of Miss Della Handy. When I broached the subject to you some days ago, and learned that it had, up to that time, been your idea to allow matters between her and this Powder Phil to shape themselves—under the delusion, I suppose, that it would be an act of restitution—"

"Stop, right there!" cut in Handy sharply, the last vestige of color fleeing his face. "Confine yourself to facts, not suppositions, or I shall have to risk your murderous fury and refuse to listen."

A moment Major Jordan stared hard at the white, tensely-drawn face of his victim, a merciless smile wreathing his lips.

"Just as you will, Frosty," he uttered crisply.

"If it's sugar-coated you want it, so you shall have it; but, there are one or two points on which we shall have to use plain words."

"I want the girl. So does Powder Phil. Who is to have her? The matter is in your hands, and decide it you must, now and here."

"On one hand, if Phil Atherton carries away the prize, you right a secret wrong—only to have it made public, to be hurled from your high position into the depths."

"On the other hand, if your decision makes me among the happiest of men, you are left to pursue the even tenor of your way, rich, respected, with scarcely so much as an occasional twinge of your laggard conscience to trouble you."

"Now, which shall it be?"

Handy uttered a petty little oath.

"Why, curse it, man! you don't seem to consider that the girl has any say in this matter at all!" he exclaimed. "As nearly as I can figure it out, the fight is useless."

"I have conveyed to her your proposition, and backed it up with all the influence I could bring to bear; but, all to no purpose."

"From the first she refused to consider it, positively and firmly. Nor was that all, for when I requested her hereafter to ignore this Powder Phil, I was again met with a refusal, Miss Della virtually snapping her fingers at my authority."

"Your only chance is to drive the lad out of camp—and that will be a pretty big contract to undertake. He's got sand, the boy has, and I haven't a doubt that his mother is backing him up in his fight."

"Between the two of you, I confess that the boy is my preference, little as I like him; but the force of circumstances compel me to take sides against him."

"Now that you have the exact state of affairs, map out your campaign, and I am with you."

Jordan's handsome face was black as a thundercloud when the magnate had ended, and there was a gleam in his dark eyes that boded ill. For

a moment he sat irresolute, his hands clutching nervously at the butts of his revolvers, then sprung to his feet.

"Come!" he cried, desperately. "We will go see the girl. If she remains obdurate, this Powder Phil must die!"

The mine-owner arose, a crafty glint in his averted eyes.

CHAPTER III.

PHIL MAKES A DISCOVERY.

His heart beating rapidly, his hat pulled low down over his eyes to shield his flushed face, Powder Phil had passed from the office of the Bonanza King Mine into the streets of the camp.

A moment he stood undecided, then turned and strode aimlessly along the one rambling, irregular street of Yankee's Find, recalling each word of the interview just ended, and conscious of a feeling of dull, heavy pain, not unmixed with indignation.

So it came about that, almost before he knew it, he had reached the door of his cabin home—a rude structure built against the face of a bluff near the eastern extremity of the camp.

The air was sweet with the odor of flowers; masses of blooming creepers festooned the solitary window and the door. All around were traces of woman's presence.

Entering, Phil laid off his hat and seated himself, his face buried dejectedly in his hands.

"Phil, my boy, what is it?"

A gentle, motherly voice, and the lad trembled, and a moisture dimmed his fearless gray eyes as he felt a pair of cool but toil-hardened hands laid softly over his throbbing temples.

Impulsively, he reached up and clasped both slender palms within his own.

"I am in trouble, mother mine," he replied, meeting with a fond look from the humid brown eyes gazing down at him. "Mr. Handy and I have quarreled. I have been discharged."

"That is bad, Phil—very bad," observed the little woman, sinking down upon her knees and looking up into the handsome face of her son. "It was about Della Handy, I know. But tell me about it, my boy."

Phil complied with the request, keeping back nothing, recounting almost word for word all that had passed between himself and his employer in the office of the Bonanza King Mine.

"I fear it is a serious thing for us," commented Mrs. Atherton, gravely, when he had concluded. "But you did right—just as I would have had you do. And the time will come when Austin Handy will admit his error."

Powder Phil slowly shook his head.

"I fear you don't know Old Frosty, mother," he observed. "He is as unyielding as adamant."

"Yet the time is coming when he will be forced to admit that he made a mistake," averred Mrs. Atherton, positively, as she arose and lifted her hands in an impassioned gesture. "The way before us is clearer now than for years, my son!"

"Our enemy has revealed himself!"

"Mother!"

With the exclamation, Powder Phil glanced up quickly, a startled look on his white face.

"You do not mean—"

"I mean that Austin Handy was your father's false friend!"

The young miner sprung erect, his breath coming hard and fast, his gray eyes glowing.

"It cannot be!"

"Strange as it may seem, it is true," quietly returned Mrs. Atherton. "Austin Handy is a gilded villain, perhaps worse—a murderer!"

At this almost incredible declaration, Philip Atherton stood like one stunned. Intuitively, his hands sought his weapons.

His mother, as if reading his thoughts, placed her hands upon his shoulders, saying:

"Do nothing rash, my son. The time is at hand when you must know all. Be brave, yet patient and cautious, and the long fight will be won."

The youth vouchsafed no response. A gleam of hope crept into his eyes. Stooping, he kissed the careworn face.

"It shall be as you say, mother mine," he uttered, with an attempt at a smile.

"But I must walk off some of these disagreeable feelings, so I'll take my Winchester and go out on the Golden Flats trail, and ride in on Laughing Luke's hearse. After that we can talk of the future."

His mother readily assenting, with his trusty rifle over his shoulder, Powder Phil strode away from the cabin and out the winding trail leading eastward to Golden Flats.

Three hundred yards from the confines of the

camp, the young miner turned aside, taking a narrow footpath running parallel to the trail through the bordering woods. Busy with perplexing thoughts, he courted the cool green shadows.

Two hundred yards beyond, the path, after making a sharp turn to avoid a dense thicket of thorny, tangled undergrowth, led up an abrupt rocky acclivity, the northern verge of which fairly overhung the tortuous wagon-track below.

No sooner had the crest of this eminence been gained than the keen eyes of Powder Phil detected the fluttering of a white dress through the undergrowth a few paces ahead.

"It is Della!" he muttered, shutting his teeth hard together. "I will not see her! I should have known better than to have come here."

Turning, he was in the act of gliding silently away, when, despite his caution, a dry stick broke with a sharp, snapping sound beneath his feet, and as instantly the bushes parted with a faint rustle, and a pretty, girlish face peered forth at the young miner.

The mischief was done. With a strange sinking of his heart, Powder Phil halted. The next moment he was face to face with Della Handy.

"I was just sure it was you, Mr. Phil," triumphantly exclaimed Old Frosty's ward, her face flushing as she confronted the young miner. "Tried to run away, didn't you? You came, I saw, I conquered! Come, go with me! I have something very, very important—

"Now, what in the world ails you, Phil Atherton?—you are not your natural self at all, so you aren't! Has Guardy been—That's it—I know it! He said he *would*, and I said he *shouldn't*—but he's gone and done it—the tyrant!"

"He's gone and done it!" repeated Powder Phil, mechanically, as he looked down into the bewildering blue eyes of Della Handy. "We quarreled. I must see you no more!"

"You must see me no more! Nonsense, Phil! You—you—"

Della Handy's voice failed her; her pretty dimpled chin quivered suspiciously, and her moistened eyes sought the ground.

An instant she stood thus, her white hands clasped before her. And in that instant Philip Atherton realized that the worldly-wise magnate of Yankee's Find had been quite correct in at least one of his surmises.

Suddenly the girl looked up, tear-drops sparkling in her long eyelashes.

"You will not desert me, Phil!" she cried, piteously, moving forward just a trifle, and placing her hands upon his broad shoulders, while she gazed pleadingly into his troubled face.

"Not now, Phil—not now, when Guardy is determined to *marry* me to that odious Major Fordyce Jordan, whom I positively—yes, *positively*—hate, and I haven't a friend in all the world—will you, Phil?"

A torrent of tears succeeded this impetuous outbreak, and before young Phil Atherton had time to realize into what perilous straits he was being carried, he was playing the part of a passionate lover in the best of faith!

The rumbling of wheels on the rocky trail below, a moment later, broke in upon the disjointed but fervent murmurings of the happy yet miserable pair.

"It is later than I thought, for that is Laughing Luke's hearse coming in," observed Phil, after listening intently a moment. "We must return to camp."

"Let us first see Luke and his passengers," suggested the girl, leading the way to the edge of the bluff.

"He has one, at least—a man on the box," observed Phil, as the stage-coach rounded a bend in the trail fifty feet away.

"Nor is the stage empty," averred Della, as her blue eyes involuntarily sought the faces of Laughing Luke and his outside passenger. "Phil, I've seen that man somewhere!"

A dark, handsome fellow was this outside passenger—bearded, well-dressed, with not a weapon in view, and sitting on the box as at perfect ease.

"I've seen him," repeated Della Handy, abstractedly, as the coach drew nearer. "Ah! he looks up!"

The next instant she started sharply. Her hand sought the arm of her companion. She pointed down at the face brought into bold relief by the dying rays of the sun.

"See—see, Phil! It is Sharper Hidefast, the murderer of my brother!"

In accents not above a whisper came the startling declaration, and with a stifled cry she sank forward in a dead faint—saved from going over

the bluff to death upon the jagged rocks below only by the strong arm of Powder Phil.

The next instant there was a swift rush of feet, and the senseless girl was jerked savagely from the arms of the young miner.

He was confronted by Major Jordan and Austin Handy, the magnate of Yankee's Find!

"Scoundrel! how *dare* you?" shouted the latter, in a sharp, irascible voice, as he lifted his clinched hand and struck the youth a stinging blow in the face. "Begone! or I'll horsewhip you where you stand."

Powder Phil drew back a pace, his gray eyes blazing with intense anger, his face bloodless, save for a dull red spot—the imprint of the insulting blow.

"Mark what I say, Austin Handy!" he enunciated, in low, vibrant tones, as he lifted his clinched right hand. "You shall repent that blow—repent it in tears of blood!"

CHAPTER IV.

DETECTIVE HAWKSHAW.

"ELEVATED in *G* as things in this camp go, and the one place in all Yankee's Find at all suited to the aristocratic tastes of the gilt-edged 'cross-cove' I seek. So the 'jungle' must be entered and its depths explored!"

The person thus communing with himself stood in the shadow of a rough building a few rods from the office of the Bonanza King Mine, his hands thrust carelessly into the pockets of his short black coat, his natty silk tie pulled well down over his eyes.

For full ten minutes he had been standing in exactly the same position, his piercing hazel eyes fixed on the sign above the doorway of the place opposite.

An odd enough sign, surely, to attract attention anywhere, and as appropriate as striking—a huge tiger crouched to spring, his open jaws blood-red and dripping, his fierce eyes sending forth a peculiar greenish-yellow glare.

"A handsome specimen of the taxidermist's art, if nothing more," continued the lone watcher. "But, if my suspicions are correct, that giant beast in his native jungle never was more fierce, cruel or treacherous than his human prototypes within."

Then, as if longer unable to resist a certain sort of fascination which this gilded hell of the gold-camp seemed to possess for him, he strode out from the shadows of the building and across the winding, irregular street, to push open one of the swinging doors and disappear within—only to halt three paces from the entrance, an expression simply indescribable on his handsome, bearded face.

A large room, almost square, and brilliantly lighted. To the right was an elaborately furnished bar—to the left, two or three billiard tables. Back of these and screened by a series of green-and-gold *portieres* a number of faro tables were open for play, while yet further to the rear, and shielded in a like manner, were several round tables for private card parties.

And, although the hour was early, the place was thronged—the tables crowded with players.

But it was neither this latter fact nor the unusual scale of operations boasted by "The Jungle," as the gambling-hell was significantly and appropriately termed, which had brought the stranger to a halt with that strange look upon his face.

Confronting him, with an expression of grim satisfaction, stood Powder Phil, his feet firmly braced as if to withstand an assault, his slender hands clutching the butts of a pair of sixes in his girdle.

For a single instant the two stood thus, the clear gray eyes of the youth meeting the fixed stare from the piercing hazel orbs of the stranger with a look almost of defiance. Then:

"Not a move—not the quiver of an eyelash, Sharper Hidefast, you wicked demon! or, by the just God who is above us both! I'll kill you where you stand!"

Enunciated in low, steady strains, from which all traces of mellowness had fled, the startling words reached not a dozen persons in all the throng; but the accompanying actions were not such as to be readily overlooked, for, with the utterance of the first syllable, the revolvers of the young miner had leaped from their resting-places in his leather girdle to a dead level with the breast of the stranger!

Then, too, he had sprung forward a pace—a quick, pantherish move bringing the muzzle of the deadly steel tubes within a foot of the heart of the man before him!

A start of surprise here—a smothered ejaculation there, and the eyes of a hundred men were focused upon the principals of the stirring scene.

Powder Phil, the Boy Miner.

A striking face was that of the stranger, as thus brought into prominence under the glaring lights—a face once seen not easily forgotten—a face betraying a personality among a thousand.

Darkly handsome—a tigerish cast of beauty, with straight, regular features on which ever lurked a smile; brilliant hazel eyes; straight, closely-cut black hair, and a full beard of like color—all in all, a fine head; a symmetrical form, clothed in a dark, closely-fitting suit, with patent-leather boots, silk hat and snowy linen.

Wholly unarmed, too, so far as external appearances went, was this handsome, sportive-looking stranger.

After that first low murmur of surprise, a strange, deathlike hush assumed sway over the interior of The Jungle—accustomed as were the *habitués* of that place to such scenes.

Held sway a moment—then a mellow, mocking laugh—stinging, irritating, maddening—rippled lightly from the red lips of the stranger.

“A leetle off his center, I allow!” he murmured, half-closing one eye and staring past the white, hard-set face of Powder Phil at the silent throng beyond. “A lamb among wolves—a cherub surrounded by devils!”

The eyes of the young miner kindled savagely.

“Mebbe—meobe not!” he retorted hotly yet guardedly. “But on my shoulders you will find neither fleece nor pin-feathers.

“For I want you, Sharper Hidefast, for the murder of one Corbin Handy in a quarrel over a three-card monte game in the smoker of a train near Delaware, Ohio, one year ago. You escaped there, but here you cannot. I am going to take you, dead or alive!

“Now, which shall it be?”

Powder Phil had spoken rapidly, yet distinctly, his hands clutching the butts of his weapons with a nervous energy born of intense anger and deadly determination.

Again the stranger laughed—this time with at least a semblance of mirth in the mellow sound.

“You want me for the murder of Corbin Handy, you say?” he asked, in a low tone.

“I want you for the murder of Corbin Handy,” sharply reiterated Powder Phil.

“You are sure I am the man you want?”

“You were Laughing Luke’s outside passenger to-night?”

“Yes.”

“Then you are the man I want—Sharper Hidefast. Come—I await your answer. Which shall it be, dead or alive?”

The voice of Powder Phil had grown harder and colder. His face was bloodless and his gray eyes fairly blazed.

The smile faded from the countenance of the stranger, giving way before an expression as stern as grave. Bending his head, he brought his lips close to the ear of the youth.

“You have made the greatest mistake of your life! I, too, am seeking Sharper Hidefast—and I am here to find him!”

Uttered in the lowest of audible strains, in so slow and deliberate a manner—fraught with such terrible earnestness—as to convey direct conviction of their truthfulness, the startling words caused Powder Phil to start as if stung.

Had his right arm fallen from his shoulder, the young miner could not have been more astonished.

“You are—”

“Not a word here! Come with me, and I will tell you all.”

And, in utter disregard of the frowning muzzles bearing upon his heart, the mysterious stranger moved forward, taking the arm of Powder Phil within his own!

A moment later they had left The Jungle.

Seated at a table not a half-dozen paces distant, Major Jordan had been a deeply interested spectator. Arising as the two disappeared through the swinging doors, he exclaimed:

“By Jove! Gentlemen, it’s a thousand to one that both don’t come back alive! And, in my humble opinion, it’s the boy who has gone to his death!”

“You’ve trimmed your sails just about right, major—I’m banking on it!” cried a cold, clear voice, as Don McVay, the ostensible proprietor of The Jungle, confronted Jordan. “The lad’s a gamecock, sure enough, but I opine he’s in the wrong pit this whirl!”

“Well, it’s not our funeral,” observed the major, shrugging his shoulders; and turning, he, too, strode out of the gambling-hell.

Meanwhile, Powder Phil and the stranger, upon leaving The Jungle, had sought retirement in the center of a large, barren space right in the heart of the camp and commonly known as the “Square.”

Here the young miner knew they would be

pretty secure from interruption, and perfectly safe so far as an eavesdropper might be concerned.

“You’re no slouch, young fellow, if you have made a pretty big mistake just now,” observed the stranger, peering around as they came to a halt. “For a strictly private chat, this spot has the appearance of being about as good as anything the camp could scare up. Now, what do you know about this murder you speak of—the killing of young Corbin Handy?”

“I didn’t come here to answer questions,” returned Powder Phil, slowly. “You have said you are not Sharper Hidefast. You came here to tell me who you are, and that is the first point to be settled between us.”

“Good enough; I like your style. I am Fred Hawkshaw, of the St. Clair Detective Agency, of Cincinnati, Ohio. I am here, as I said before, in quest of this Sharper Hidefast.”

“Now, who are you?”

“My name is Philip Atherton—better known in these diggings as Powder Phil. I am a miner,” was the prompt reply.

“I suppose, Detective Hawkshaw, you can give sure proof of the truth of your statement?”

“You see, I am inclined to be a trifle cautious in this affair, for not two hours ago you were pointed out to me as this Hidefast, the murderer of young Handy. And as your accuser was an eye-witness of the murder, it stands me in hand to keep the wool off my eyes.”

The detective laughed.

“I think you are doing pretty well, Powder Phil,” he observed, in an easy, off-hand way. “The only guarantee I can offer you is a glimpse of some of the ‘tools’ I carry—such as a pair of bracelets and my badge.

“But, who pointed you on my trail?”

“The sister of the murdered man,” was the reply, and Powder Phil narrated as much as he thought fit of the incident at the bluff.

“The girl wasn’t to be blamed for falling into such an error,” observed Detective Hawkshaw. “It was quite natural, for I happen, just now, to answer to the description of Sharper Hidefast, even to the smallest detail.

“As you are a friend of Miss Handy, I can readily understand all that before seemed strange to me in this encounter, and I am willing that you should have a like perfect knowledge of the matter. From the steps you have already taken I would infer that you would be not at all adverse to being in at the death on this hunt.

“The affair is in just this shape. The murder was committed a trifle more than a year ago. Hidefast and his pals, escaping by leaping from the train, succeeded in getting out of the State, leaving not a clew by which they might be traced. The rewards have steadily increased, until now there are several thousand dollars awaiting the capture of the desperado.

“The detective bureau of which I am a member has all along had the case in charge, but not a peg could we move, work as we might; but it’s a long road, you know, that has no end. A month ago, by the merest chance, it was learned that a fellow exactly tallying with this Sharper Hidefast had for some months been making Bozeman his headquarters.

“So three of us—the chief, a brother detective and myself—hurried westward as fast as the iron horse would carry us, only to find that our prey had shifted the scene of his operations—going none knew whither.

“But, we were not inclined to give up easily. After two weeks of diligent searching, we again lifted the trail, and run it as far as Golden Flats, where we again lost it, a week ago.

“Since that time not a clew have we found—until to-day. Yesterday it was decided that I should come on to Yankee’s Find, to consult Mr. Austin Handy, the uncle of the murdered man, and I was to be followed here by one of my comrades.

“In conversation with Laughing Luke today, I was forced to the conclusion that, here in Yankee’s Find, we would unearth the murderer and end the long chase!

“And to-night, the moment I entered the gambling-hell back yonder, I knew that my conclusions were correct, for, seated at a table not a dozen paces distant was no less a personage than Harper Hidefast!”

“You will make the arrest at once?” asked Powder Phil.

“No; the fellow is surrounded by coppers, and it would require a strong force to secure him. He has no suspicion of the cause of the little scene between us, and to-morrow he can be gobbled up with the greatest ease.”

“Strategy will succeed where force would avail nothing; but, to make a sure thing of it,

we shall have a strong posse in readiness to support us.

“And in this latter fact lies the reason for my having made you my confidant in this matter.

“I judge, from what I have seen of you in the brief time since we met, that full confidence could be placed in you as the leader of such a posse. Then, too, I suppose that you are pretty well acquainted and can single out the reliable men of the camp; so, if you feel at all inclined to lend us a helping hand in this matter, we shall make it worth your while. Now, what say you?”

“I will most assuredly do anything possible to secure the arrest of Sharper Hidefast,” promptly replied Phil.

“Then quietly get together ten good men by morning, and have them assemble by ones and twos at the bar-room of the Great American Hotel not later than seven o’clock. I will await you there.”

“Ten good—By Jove! I have it!” exclaimed Phil, enthusiastically. “Little Lightning and his Prairie Invincibles are the team among ten thousand.”

“Little Lightning? Who—”

A sharp rattle of firearms in the direction of The Jungle interrupted Detective Hawkshaw. With a hastily-uttered sentence to Powder Phil, he turned and strode rapidly toward the gambling-hell, while, without an instant’s hesitation, Phil bounded swiftly down the winding street in the opposite direction.

CHAPTER V. THE MISSING BOWIE.

“D’YE moind, now, et’s ther gout we wul all be afther havin’, wid our aitin’ an’ slaipin’, slaipin’ an’ aitin’, wid devil a bit av a ruction avin’ to stirr ther blood in our veins—so et wull Musbal murber! et’s mesilf, bhoys, as is moighty tired av settin’ wid me purty hands forninst me—so it is!”

Doleful enough were the words, and upon the sadly-freckled, sun-browned face of the speaker was an expression little short of lugubrious.

And that not he alone was disconsolate was amply attested by a glance at the striking array of visages ranged around the long table.

Ten there were in all—youthful, healthful faces, bronzed by sun and wind, each bearing the indices of manly courage—even daring.

“Ki-yi! Pat!” promptly chimed in a second voice, from the opposite side of the table; “an’ mebby dis yere chile doan’ feel ez rusty ez er possum in er nail-kaig!”

“An’ hyar, pard!”

“An’ hyar!” in a lusty chorus.

“Faith! an’ et’s ‘boots an’ saddle’ fwhat we’re all pinin’ to hear,” continued the first speaker, his mellow tones rising above the din he had created. “Et’s a brush wid ther red-skins, or a tussle wid ther road-agents we nade—so it is!”

“An’ what says Little Lightning?” cried a slender youth with blue eyes and long, light-brown hair, rising from his seat at the foot of the table.

Instantly all was silence—every eye turning to the head of the board—to the face of the personage seated there, Little Lightning, Captain of the Prairie Invincibles.

A face well worth more than a passing glance was that of the young ranger chief.

Dark almost as an Indian’s, yet clear and ruddy; features smooth and regular, yet formed in the molds of firmness and strength; eyes black as midnight, yet clear and piercing as an eagle’s; hair of sable hue, descending in silken meshes about his shoulders. A strange, wild face, yet such a one as to inspire confidence.

And as he arose to reply to the question, it could be seen that his form was lithe and willowy—supple as a panther’s; broad of shoulder, trim of waist, faultless in torso, perfect in members.

Clad in buckskin, fringed and beaded, a leather girdle incircling his middle, he looked the beau ideal of a dashing young plainsman.

A moment his eyes swept the eager, upturned faces, a light smile upon his beardless lips. Then he spoke, saying:

“It shall be as you say, pard. I, too, am weary of the quiet life of the camp—am ready to renew our vagabond life on the prairies; but if waxing red-skins or converting bad road-agents into good citizens, via the rifle and the halter of Judge Lynch, has become a mania with you, I’ve a little campaign to propose:

“Now, what’s the matter with a turn after Black Boone’s Vultures? They’ve taken toll on most every trail leading in or out of Yankee’s

Find, and that, too, in spite of Dark Dahlgren and his Vigilantes. The road-agents have played their game right up to the handle. Not a man have they lost in two months, and they have carried away as spoils thousands of dollars.

"Times without number have the Vigilantes gone in pursuit, only to come back empty-handed, swearing the Vultures had vanished—going none knew whither.

"Then, too, quick upon the return of Dark Dahlgren and his men, in several instances, there have come reports of bold robberies, invariably committed in a locality miles away from the scene of the preceding outrage, and in an opposite direction.

"If rendezvous these Vultures have, it is most cunningly concealed, for no trace of it has yet been found.

"Black Boone and his Vultures are well worthy of our attention, and there is just enough mystery in the matter to lend zest to our efforts. What say you, pards?"

A lusty shout of assent was the answer, and instantly every youth was upon his feet.

"Steady, lads!" continued Little Lightning, lifting his hand and bringing an instant hush. "If we are to take this trail, we shall do so at once. And no one outside our ranks must know why or where we go. Look to your horses and your weapons, and be in readiness. At daybreak we leave camp."

"Killed, you say?"

"Yes; stranger in camp, too—hain't bin hyar three hours. But he's fixed fer plantin'—knife jammed clean ter ther han'le right inter his back."

"When did it happen?"

"Wal, 'tain't menny minutes sence he war see'd alive. Reckon he hain't more'n dead."

Leaving his horse to care for itself, the first speaker sprung from the saddle and pushed through the ranks of the rapidly growing crowd, fairly fighting his way to the front—to a position beside the inanimate form of the murdered man.

Right at the corner of the building occupied by The Jungle the latter lay, face downward, the horn handle of a bowie-knife protruding from under the left shoulder.

Just in time to note these facts was the horseman, for the next instant there came the command:

"Lay a-holt, sum ov you fellers! We must git ther critter out ov this, fer ther case demands 'vestigation.

"That's right—stiddy, now! Right into The Jungle; reckon a billiard-table'll answer ter lay 'im out on."

Uttered in a quiet, authoritative tone, the command in the first sentence had been quickly obeyed, the crowd parting right and left to give space for action, and in a moment's time the murdered man was lying upon a billiard-table in the gambling-house.

The face thus momentarily exposed to the brilliant lights was that of Hawkshaw, the detective; and that he was dead, there could not be the shadow of a doubt.

"Thar's bin foul play, pards," continued the personage who had taken charge of the matter—a burly, broad-shouldered fellow—none other, in fact, than Dark Dahlgren, captain of the Vigilantes and marshal of the camp. "We must 'vestigate a leetle."

"Major Jordan," turning to that personage, "will ye take two or three men an' keep order in ther shebang wile I conduct ther inquest?"

"Yaas! Wal, thar's Don McVay fer one, an' I reckon Paul Prendle over yender, won't object ter lendin' ye a hand."

"Now that that leetle p'int are settled, ther fu'st thing to arrove at are, who is this man?" and Dark Dahlgren impressively laid his hand upon the shoulders of Hawkshaw.

A moment of profound silence followed; then a short, stout old man, dressed in seedy black, with a bald head, twinkling blue eyes and a smooth, round red face and small, pursed-up lips stepped forward, hat in hand, saying, in a shrill, treble voice.

"Obediah Doogood, o' Keokuk, Iowa, he signed himself to-night, captain, at the Great American Hotel. A queer name, but I s'pose he had as much right to it as some others in the camp have to the handles they wear."

"I didn't ask his business, for it wasn't mine to do so. He paid his score, an' after supper left the hotel. Didn't say where he was goin'—didn't ask him."

"At what hour did he leave the hotel?"
"Jest at dark."

"That'll do, Kernel Bundy.

"Now, ther next p'int are, who see'd Obediah Doogood alive after he left ther hotel?"

"May it please your Honor, the deceased entered my place at fifteen minutes before nine o'clock," said Dan McVay, stepping forward.

"Wal, what then?"

"Ten feet from the door he was met by one Philip Atherton, commonly known as Powder Phil."

"Purceed—purceed! Don't keep ther court waitin'!"

"Atherton, with his hands upon his revolvers, commanded the deceased to halt. Hot words passed between the two, but in tones so low, that only fragments of their speech could be heard.

"Finally, they left the place together, and that was the last that was seen of Doogood alive."

"What happened hyer after the deceased went out? Was thar trouble ov any kind?"

"There was, but not bearing on this case."

"That's fer ther court ter decide. What was ther trouble?"

"Shanghai Sam and Llano Luke had a dispute over cards. Several shots were fired, but no material damage was done, and the racket blew over."

"That's all. Who's ther next witness?"

A moment of profound silence ensued; then Major Jordan stepped forward, saying:

"I would suggest, Dahlgren, that Laughing Luke be put upon the stand. He it was who discovered the corpse."

"Laughing Luke? Will ther gen'leman step for'ard?" and Dark Dahlgren's narrow gray eyes instantly singled out the man.

With evident reluctance, the witness responded to the summons.

"Don't know much about this hyar case," he observed, as he took his stand facing the captain of the Vigilantes. "Ther dead man kem down on ther outside 'th me from Golden Flats ter-day. 'Peared ter be a purty nice sort ov feller. He putt up at ther Great American Hotel. Next I see'd ov him, he war out thar, dead. That's all."

"Hol' on a minute, Luke—don't be in sech a pesky hurry!" exclaimed the leader of the Vigilantes, as the stage-driver turned away.

"We want ter know under w'at sarcumstances ye found ther deceased."

"Jes' as ye found him. I kem hyar ter see Powder Phil. Jes' as I reached ther corner ov ther buildin', I stumbled over ther dead man in ther dark. That is all I know."

"Wait! Did you meet Powder Phil?"

"No!"

"That'll do."

Then Dark Dahlgren rapped sharply with the butt of his revolver upon the edge of the billiard table, and briskly called for attention, checking as if by magic, the low hum of voices.

"Now, listen, pards," he began, in the most impressive manner he could command. "A man—a puffec' stranger—hes bin murdered hyar in camp—struck down by a deadly assassin whose next act may be ter take your life or mine."

"We can't allow such goin's-on, nohow it can be fixed."

"It 'ud hurt ther reputation ov Yankee's Find, an' we can't afford ter hev a mill-stone draggin' ter ther neck ov ther camp."

"An' so this hyar 'vestigation is bein' held. We must hunt out an' punish ther murderer."

"We hev diskivered ther identity ov ther dead man. Ther naixt an' only remainin' p'int ter be fetched ter light are, who did ther red work?"

"I, gen'lemen, hev fully made up my mind on that score."

"But one man in Yankee's Find c'u'd 'a' had a motive fer ther deed, and that man is Powder Phil!"

"An' hyar's ther evidence w'ot convicts him—his knife buried in the heart ov Obediah Doogood!"

"You lie!"

In tones of pent-up fury, the two words burst from the bearded lips of Laughing Luke. He stood facing the captain of the Vigilantes, not six paces distant, his big gray eyes ablaze, his sinewy form drawn to its full height, his broad chest swelling, his bronzed hands grasping with deadly steadiness the butts of the "sixes" in his belt!

Dark Dahlgren stood for an instant like one electrified; then, with a wicked smile upon his heavy, sensual lips, he turned to pluck the blade from the back of Hawkshaw.

Turned—to draw back with a snarling oath.

The knife was gone!

"Ten thousand furies!" he grated, turning his

evil black eyes, now glowing redly, upon the face of Laughing Luke. "Vigilantes ov Yankee's Find, we hev bin tricked! Guard well every door an' window! See that no man leaves Ther Jungle!"

"Ther knife war thar not a minute ago—I'll take my Bible oath! Whar is it now? Ther ken be but one answer—stolen, by an accomplice, ter conceal ther identity ov ther murderer!"

"By Jove! Dahlgren, you've hit the nail on the head," observed Jordan, the first to break the oppressive silence succeeding the words of the Vigilante.

"The knife was there—just as you say. And it bore, carved on the handle, the two letters, 'P. A.'"

"Phil Atherton's initials," suggested Dan McVay, with a significant smile.

"Exactly!" grimly averred Dahlgren. "Ther quickest way ter settle this matter is the best."

"Jim Spicer, take six men an' go fetch ther pizen cub afore ther court ov Judge Lynch. We'll try ther case, an' we'll give ther lad a fair chainte."

"In the mean time, we'll see ef we can't find this knife. My 'spicions p'int toward Laughing Luke, an' we'll begin with him; so, jes' trot ther critter for'ard, sum ov ye!"

A murmur of surprise ran around the room. The Herculean driver had vanished!

CHAPTER VI.

BOLD STROKES.

WHAT had become of Laughing Luke?

At the very instant Dark Dahlgren had turned to pluck the tell-tale blade from the back of the dead detective, the old driver swiftly retreated from the billiard table to the ranks of the crowd, whence, with silent baste, he made his way to the outer air.

Almost unnoticed, too, was this strange exploit, so intense was the excitement gradually wrought up by the leader of the Vigilantes.

Once outside of The Jungle, Luke halted, to await developments within, an anxious look in his eyes.

One of the oddities of the region, was this man.

Almost a giant in bight and build, yet formed so symmetrically as at first glance to appear scarcely above the average size of men, he carried in his massive shoulders, arms and limbs the strength of a veritable Hercules.

Roughly clad, weather-beaten and rugged, there yet remained many traces of manly beauty in the face of this strange personage—a nobility none the less for the physical ravages of a half-century.

Who he was, or whence he came, was an unfathomed mystery, as deep and dark to the man himself as to his fellows; for, two-thirds of his life had been a dead blank, into which not a ray of the light of memory had ever crept.

The gloom of his dead past seemed ever before him, keeping his face hard and cold—barring out every gleam of hope, every trace of joy or mirth.

And, as if in sheer mockery, the denizens of Yankee's Find had given him the *sobriquet* of Laughing Luke—a title which, despite its incongruity, he bid fair to carry so long as he remained in the camp.

Of friends or associates, he had but few, aside from the Prairie Invincibles and of the few, Powder Phil was the prime favorite. From a casual meeting during the early days of the camp, a strong friendship had sprung up between the two—a friendship as lasting as true.

With these facts in mind, the reader may readily understand the actions of Laughing Luke within The Jungle, as well as what follows.

Thoroughly devoted to Powder Phil, the old driver was determined to stand between him and Dark Dahlgren, even at the cost of life.

Therefore, no sooner had the captain of the Vigilantes commanded Jim Spicer to form a posse and go after the young miner, than faithful Luke was off at a swift pace toward the Atherton cabin.

"It is false—all false!" he muttered between his hard-set teeth, as he glided rapidly through the darkness. "Phil didn't do it—it hain't in the boyee ter strike in ther dark. It's above-board an' fair play, with him!"

"But ther knife!—it was mine before it was Phil's, for I gave it ter him. But ther boyee didn't use it ter-night! No! no! it killed ther stranger, but it wasn't Phil's hand that drove it home—I'd swear it!"

"They can't use ther blade ag'in him. I've got it. I'll destroy it! Then let Dark Dahlgren

gren have a care! Harm Phil he shall not—I'll die first!"

And thus communing with himself, Laughing Luke halted not until he stood before the door of the cabin home of the Athertons.

Once—twice—three times, in as many seconds, he knocked—not loudly, but faintly and cautiously, a peculiar tremor thrilling every fiber of his massive form.

A light step inside, a sharp clicking of the rude latch, and the door swung ajar, revealing Mrs. Atherton.

They confronted each other, these two—the weak woman striving to right a great wrong to her and hers, the strong man drifting blindly under the blight of a buried past—both for the moment, from some strange cause, utterly silent, speechless!

"Is—is Phil here?" queried Luke, at length in a hoarse tone, scarcely above a whisper.

"Who calls for me?" exclaimed a cheery young voice, as Powder Phil appeared beside his mother. "Hello! Luke, is it you? Come inside—you're as welcome as the sunshine on a May morn!"

But Luke drew back, saying, almost sharply: "No—I can't, Phil! I can't! But I must see you, lad—at once!"

There was something almost plaintive in the man's tones, and without an instant's hesitation the young miner crossed the threshold and stepped out into the darkness.

Mrs. Atherton retired, closing the door.

"What is it, Luke?"

"Whar is your bowie, boy?"

"My knife? It is gone, Luke—lost from my belt, I don't know where."

"Glory!" ejaculated Laughing Luke, impulsively clasping the young miner in a bear-like hug. "Say that ag'in, leetle pard—say it ag'in!"

"Say what, Luke? What on earth—"

"Sh! you'll know all, lad, soon enough, I reckon," the old driver hastily interposed. "Just answer my questions as quick as you know how, fer we hain't a minute ter lose now."

"When did ye lose ther blade?"

"This afternoon, late."

"Whar, Phil?"

"On or near the bluff overhanging the Golden Flats trail, just east of camp, I think."

"Was any one from the camp out that way?"

"Yes; Austin Handy, Major Jordan and Miss Handy were all there. It was about something that happened there that I wished to speak with you at The Jungle to-night."

"I knowed it!" exclaimed Luke slapping his leg vehemently.

"Knew what?" queried Phil.

"No matter," was the evasive response. "Now my lad, ter get down ter ther meat ov my errant hyer, I've mighty bad news fer ye."

"Thet knife hes bin found in ther back ov a dead man—Obediah Doogood, my outsider to-day—an' you are accused ov puttin' it ther!"

"Kind Heaven! accused of—of—"

"Murder!" quietly supplied Luke, catching the young miner by the shoulder as he reeled back. "Listen, Phil, ter w'ot I say—words are precious now."

"You are ther victim ov a putt-up job. Even now Jim Spicer, at the head ov a strong posse, is on his way hyar ter take ye before Jedge Lynch—an' you know w'ot that means!"

"Ther on'y chaince, Phil, as I can see, is fer you ter git out ov camp hot-foot—and stay away till ther thing is cleared up, or blows over. 'Twon't do ter resk anything with them Vigilantes, jest now."

"Leave camp? Not for the Bonanza King Mine, Luke!" exclaimed Phil, quickly, rallying from his momentary panic. "I have committed no crime, and I shall not flee like a guilty wretch."

"I am not wanted here, I know, and I won't play into the hands of my enemies by leaving. You are right, in that it is a putt-up job; and to frustrate the designs of the men at the bottom of it, I shall stay and face the charge. Let Jim Spicer and his gang come—I am ready!"

Without vaunt or boast, in calm, measured tones, the young miner had spoken, and Laughing Luke realized that it was useless to argue the question.

"So be it!" he muttered, doggedly. "You are ov ther genuine metal, an' no mistake; but, yonder come Dahlgren's men. Go tell your—your mother ov your trouble; an' if it comes ter ther wu'st, why—Wal, I'll be *thar*, Phil!"

A quick, fervent clasp of their hands, and the two men separated—Laughing Luke darting away in the darkness, while the young miner glided swiftly toward his cabin door.

The trial, such as it was, had been had; all

the evidence heard had been adduced by the prosecution, nothing having been offered by the defendant, save a point-blank denial of guilt.

And Powder Phil was in a bad box—there could be no concealing or denying that fact. The case against him had been built by a master-hand, not unaided by fate itself. The verdict returned had been the only one possible—"Guilty!"

But, even yet, with that ominous word sounding in his ears like a death-knell, our hero had not flinched or faltered. He could not believe that the plotters would permit the farce to end in tragedy.

It never occurred to him that Dark Dahlgren and his men were acting in deadly earnest—that they really and truly believed him guilty of slaying Obediah Doogood. They would attempt to drive him from the camp, and that would end the whole matter.

And so, with his hands pinioned behind him, he had been led forth from The Jungle, in accordance with the mandate of Judge Lynch, marched through the streets of the camp, and brought to a halt under the spreading boughs of a huge tree on the northern boundary of the Square.

And even then he could not believe himself face to face with the Grim Reaper. An expression tantamount to a smile hovered on his red lips as he gazed steadily at the array of cold, stolid visages surrounding him.

Then a lariat was hastily thrown over a massive limb overhead, and the noosed end adjusted about his neck. That done, Dahlgren stepped forward, his face stern and determined in the glaring light of a half-score torches, saying:

"Phil Atherton, mine isn't a pleasant task, no-how it can be fixed; for you are a young man, an' I do hate ter cut short w'ot might 'a' b'in a good an' useful life; but I can't let sech scruples stand in ther path ov duty. You have sinned, an' you must suffer. Your last hour has come. Ef you a have a word ter say, now is ther time."

Phil's heart sunk like lead. With the words of the Vigilante, he suddenly awoke to a full and terrible realization of his desperate strait.

At the same instant, he felt the lariat tighten about his throat. All grew black before him. He was dimly conscious of a vision of a sad, patient face, of a pair of humid brown eyes—his mother's, and another—blue-eyed, fair and glad as a May morn. He was filled with a vain regret that he had not heeded the warning words of Laughing Luke!

Laughing Luke! Whose voice was that? Whose but faithful Luke's!

Striking and clawing, pushing and kicking, his great arms and legs working like flails and clearing a path as if by magic, the old driver advanced rapidly through the crowd, crying:

"Hold! Dahlgren—hold! or die! Would ye hang an innocent man? Hold, I say! or die!"

Had a thunderbolt descended, its effects could scarcely have been more startling than this wholly unexpected appearance of Laughing Luke. The lariat slipped through the hands of the Vigilantes, and almost to a man they turned to their leader.

The next moment Luke was between the prisoner and Dark Dahlgren, confronting the latter.

"If ye must hang a man to-night, Dahlgren, hang ther right one!" he cried, his deep voice strangely hoarse. "I, not that boy, slew Obediah Doogood!"

Powder Phil started, opening his honest gray eyes to their widest. As if by inspiration, the true explanation of the situation flashed upon him.

"Luke shoulders this crime, and puts his life in the balance to save me!" he gasped, moodily.

For an instant Dark Dahlgren stood as if spellbound.

"You murdered Obediah Doogood?" he suddenly ejaculated, rallying his mental forces.

"Wal, 'pon my life! I half believe it!"

"But whar's ther knife ye smuggled away? Speak! or—"

"It is hyar!" quietly interrupted Luke, plucking the blade from his girdle and holding it before the marshal's eyes. "See! Am I not right?"

"It is ther knife!" Dahlgren admitted, just a trifle unwillingly. "But, it is Powder Phil's—not yours."

"It was mine before it was Phil's—it is mine now! An' my hand struck ther blow that has tarnished its brightness! For what, no matter; but I killed ther man."

Then Phil spoke, his voice cold and hard—utterly devoid of feeling.

"Listen, Vigilantes of Yankee's Find!" he

said, his eyes meeting those of Dahlgren with unflinching steadiness. "I refuse to accept life at the cost of another. I repeat that I did *not* kill Obediah Doogood; neither did Laughing Luke. He lies to save my neck from the halter, at the risk of his own. I will consent to no such sacrifice."

"Let ther young viper hang!" hissed a malignant voice in the throng. "Up with him, pard! Guilty or not, he's too infernally good for this hyar camp!"

The mad scheme of Laughing Luke had failed. A groan of dismay broke from his lips—to change in a twinkling to a fierce, exultant shout.

Out from the front ranks of the crowd three lithe, supple forms had glided, each with a knife in hand, to the side of Phil. The next instant a pistol-shot rung out, closely followed by a wild commotion, and quicker than thought the weird scene was shrouded in densest gloom—the flickering torches trampled under foot!

"Steady, lads—steady!" roared Dahlgren, in stentorian tones. "It is Little Lightning an' his gang! Fall back—form a circle! Shoot down all who attempt to pass!"

Even as he spoke, there was a swift rush of feet—a burst of elfish laughter.

"Too late, Captain Dahlgren—everlastingly too late!" rung out a clear young voice. "Little Lightning and his Prairie Invincibles bid you good-night and better luck!"

The thunder of iron-shod hoofs in a mad rush down the winding street, and Dark Dahlgren and his Vigilantes were alone in their discomfiture!

CHAPTER VII.

HAWKSHAW'S PARDS.

"HAWKSHAW is dead!"

"Dead?"

"Murdered!"

"How did it happen, and where, Tom?"

"Done in the dark—a knife-thrust in the back; right in the heart of the camp of Yankee's Find."

"The motive?"

"Hidden, Dick."

"And the murderer?"

A significant shrug of the massive shoulders of the first speaker was the only response immediately vouchsafed.

None other than the mounted stranger who had appeared outside The Jungle, just after the discovery of the body of the dead detective, was this personage. He stood with his left hand resting lightly upon the arching neck of his horse, his right clasping the palm of his companion. Around them lay the shadows of a timber clump. Day was just dawning.

Tall, broad of shoulder, lean and sinewy—a lion in strength, a panther in agility, his face was of saturnine cast; eyes dark, brilliant and full of reckless fire; all in all, requiring no-second glance to determine that he was of mixed blood.

A stanch friend and a deadly foe, was this man, Tom Swift—better known as Red Swift; a detective famed far and wide for superb craft and dauntless courage.

The second man was smaller—of much slighter build. He was blue-eyed and fair-haired, with tawny mustache. His hands were white and slender. At first glance, he seemed an effeminate sort of fellow. Yet he had faced death a score times with a smile upon his handsome face, with never a tremor of fear. He was an enigma—a mystery. But few men could read him right. Red Swift was one of the few.

St. Clair was his name—Richard St. Clair. He, too, was a detective—a man with a record.

Both men were clad in plain, dark clothes, with broad-brimmed black hats. Each was well armed, booted and spurred.

Red Swift had ridden hard. His long raven locks were in disorder, and his face was grimed and dusty. The clean-limbed bay at his side was fairly dripping.

Dick St. Clair, on the other hand, was cool and serene—his apparel in perfect order, his horse fresh and well groomed.

After Tom Swift's silent answer to St. Clair's last question, the two men quietly tethered their horses and seated themselves on the trunk of a fallen tree hard by.

"It's a queer case—I hardly know what to make of it," observed the half-breed, in slow, steady tones, after a moment's silence. "Of course, I've formed an opinion, but it is based on mere guess-work. I'll put you in possession of the facts, and then we'll see how we agree."

He then narrated the facts of the killing, so far as they had been brought to light; the sum and substance of Dark Dahlgren's inquiry into the case, and the manner in which Powder Phil

had at the last moment been wrested from the Vigilantes by Little Lightning and his Prairie Invincibles.

"As was natural, after recognizing the body as that of our pard, the first thought flashing into my head was that he had run afoul of Hidefast or some of his gang," Swift said, in conclusion. "But I must confess that, in the light of the subsequent events I have just narrated, my opinions underwent a very material change.

"To begin with, there's scarcely a chance in twenty that Hidefast is in Yankee's Find, as the uncle of young Corbin Handy is the magnate of the camp. He wouldn't care to encounter him.

"Then, too, this Powder Phil had had an altercation with Hawkshaw but a few minutes before the tragedy, the two leaving The Jungle together.

"That was the last seen of our pard alive.

"On the other hand, the accused youth didn't have the ghost of a show in the so-called trial before Judge Lynch.

"His entire bearing throughout was one of entire innocence—real or most artfully simulated, and he wasn't given a chance to prove a single assertion.

"It seemed a foregone conclusion with the Vigilantes that he was the author of the red work, and the trial was hurried through in as short a time as possible.

"And yet, these border tribunals seldom go far wrong.

"Another fact in this connection is this: The several trails leading into Yankee's Find are infested by a band of road-agents—gentlemen of Jack-o'-lantern proclivities, now here—now there, always appearing when and where least expected.

"Now, what more reasonable to suspect than that this Little Lightning and his fellows are the toll-takers, having as their accomplices and spies Powder Phil and Laughing Luke?

"Granting this, we have at once an explanation for the strange actions of the Jehu, as well as a motive for the rescue of Powder Phil by the young prairie vagabonds."

"True enough, and the theory is plausible, too," St. Clair averred. "But neither the logic of your reasoning nor the strangeness of the action of this Little Lightning can change the absolute facts.

"I am strongly of the opinion that Sharper Hidefast is accountable for the death of our pard, and it's an idea I can't get rid of until I know something to the contrary.

"He is no ordinary rascal. Already we have found that he avoids the beaten paths of his ilk, to turn up in the most unexpected quarters. In fact, were we to find our man in one of Austin Handy's bosom friends, I can't say that I would be surprised.

"In other respects, I agree with you.

"But the real issue before us is, what steps shall we take in the matter? Our pard must be avenged."

"He shall be!" was the quiet response. "Your hand, Dick—here let us swear to avenge his death!"

"I am with you, heart and soul, Tom Swift! Sleeping or waking, we will have no rest—know no aim, other than tracking down and bringing to justice the cold-blooded slayer of our faithful pard!"

Silently eye met eye, and the hands of the two men met in a fervent clasp.

Well might the assassin of Hawkshaw have trembled. Pitted against him were two of the law's most unerring and relentless sleuth-hounds.

"The way is clear before us," resumed Red Swift, in his matter-of-fact way. "Not a soul in Yankee's Find is aware of our presence here, for I left the camp without revealing my identity to any one immediately after the rescue.

"As nearly as I can figure it out, our best plan will be to disguise ourselves, go out to the camp and there sift the matter to the bottom."

"Then we'll let no grass grow under our feet," said St. Clair, arising and vaulting lightly into the saddle. "We will go at once."

Red Swift followed his example, and the two set off at a sharp canter toward Golden Flats. Within an hour they were on the trail to Yankee's Find.

CHAPTER VIII.

MAJOR JORDAN IN HIS TRUE COLORS.

DON MCVAY, of The Jungle, was closeted with Major Fordyce Jordan in the latter's apartment at the Great American Hotel.

The door was locked: a hat hung over the keyhole, effectually concealing the interior of

the room from any prying eye in the corridor without, and the dark chintz curtains at the windows were closely drawn.

The two men courted secrecy—conversed in tones scarcely above a whisper.

On the narrow table between them lay a pair of steel handcuffs and a detective's badge.

"You see I was right," uttered Jordan, with a grim smile. "I knew I could not be wrong—I recognized the fellow as Fred Hawkshaw the moment I laid eyes on him."

"And it was well that you did," McVay declared, toying restlessly with the manacles. "Ugh! my neck feels uncomfortable every time I think of that Handy affair!

"Let me say right here, too, that we ain't out of the woods yet. Hawkshaw never tracked us down alone. There are others of the sleuth-hounds somewhere near—Dick St. Clair and Red Swift, perhaps. You know the three were inseparables."

"True for you," assented the major. "I have much the same idea. In fact, it occurred to me that the mounted stranger, who appeared just after the discovery of Hawkshaw's body, might be one of the gentry."

"Then we want to be exceeding wary," McVay observed.

"Oh! there isn't the least danger, backed up as we are by Dahlgren and the Vigilantes. Of course, *they* don't know anything about this Handy matter; but *they'll* stand by us, all the same, if it comes to the scratch."

"For, as chief mogul of our secret brotherhood, I reckon I shall be entitled to the right to decide who is inimical to the best interests of all concerned," and Major Jordan uttered a peculiar laugh.

"But I put a spy on the movements of the mounted stranger," he went on, "for it won't do to run the slightest risk, now."

"There's just a hundred thousand dollars at stake—as snug a sum as we dare hope ever to lay hands upon, and the slightest hint of our connection with the murder of young Corbin Handy would forever blight out the remotest chance of success."

"Old Frosty has been driven to the limit—a single straw might turn the scales, so that he would openly defy us."

"If we can head off the sleuth-hounds on our scent, the game is ours—even if we have to abduct the girl and force her consent to a marriage."

"So far as the coming of Hawkshaw is concerned, it has already been turned to good account. It opened the way to rid the camp of our stumbling block, Powder Phil, and at the same time drew Dark Dahlgren and his men away in pursuit of Little Lightning, leaving the bullion of Old Frosty at the mercy of Black Boone's Vultures to-morrow."

"Oh! there isn't any two ways about it—the cards are running our way this time, and we'll quit our big deal richer by heaps and heaps of gold!"

"The only thing we've got to do, is to keep our heads level and play our hands for all they are worth."

Major Jordan leaned back from the table, a crafty glint in his black eyes, rubbing his slender white hands softly together.

Don McVay sat quite still, a perplexed expression on his cold face.

"But this Hawkshaw matter?" he muttered, at length. "I can't see through it—there's a mystery about it I can't fathom. Does Dahlgren know of the innocence of Powder Phil, or—?"

"Don't worry about that, old man," broke in the major. "The worthy Dahlgren firmly believes Atherton guilty of the crime. Could he catch him, he'd hang him higher than Haman, despite the meddling of Laughing Luke. Thanks to the knife, the trick was so worked as to deceive every one. Even Old Frosty is staggered by the evidence."

"But, had *these* things"—indicating the handcuffs and the badge—"been found on the body of the detective, along with certain documents I have in my possession, the ending might have been different."

"Swift and sure," is my motto, and when I strike I strike hard.

"Since the action taken by Little Lightning and his gang to-night, there is a strong belief in many quarters of the camp that the young vagabonds and the Vultures are one and the same."

"Then, too, the strange course of Laughing Luke has given rise to the suspicion that both he and the young miner are members of the outlaw clan, and it's safe to say we'll have the field to ourselves hereafter."

"You can readily understand how public sentiment was pointed in the proper direction, when

I say that my tongue has not been idle. Whatever he may have been elsewhere, Major Fordyce Jordan is unquestionably the shining light of Yankee's Find just now."

"That be is," assented the gambler, dryly. "But suppose we take up another branch of the subject—Old Frosty's ward?"

"Little need be said on that point," Jordan averred. "If Old Frosty don't bring her to terms by sunset to-morrow, we'll take the matter out of his hands."

"Abduct the girl?"

"Yes; and in such a way as to have the act laid to the door of Powder Phil and his fellows—not even Handy himself being any the wiser."

"A capital idea! So far as I can see, every point has been considered—every emergency provided for," observed Don McVay.

"All that now remains, is for us to keep right along in the good work. Everything is clear—there's hardly a chance to slip up in our well-laid plans."

"But the hour is growing late. It is after two o'clock. We'd better adjourn."

"The motion is in order," Jordan agreed, rising from the table. "But wait—a night-cap of real old Scotch whisky is, to my notion, the proper thing before we separate."

As he spoke, he stepped quickly across the room to a curtained recess, sweeping aside the chintz screen with a deft movement of his hand.

The next instant, speechless from sheer consternation, he started back, his face turning ashen gray.

And small wonder!

Confronting him, his piercing blue eyes ablaze with wrathful triumph, his face colorless as marble, and as hard and unyielding, his breath coming quick and deep, confronting him, a self-cocking revolver in each hand elevated to a level, the hammers tremblingly poised under the nervous pressure of the long, bony fingers bearing against the yielding triggers—there stood the man Major Jordan had so deeply sinned against, whose wealth, whose every earthly hope he had placed at stake—Austin Handy, the magnate of Yankee's Find!

Had an open grave, with its attendant coffin and shroud, suddenly yawned a wide to receive him, the arch-plotter could scarcely have been more terribly astounded.

Nor was his villainous *confrere* a whit less unnerved.

For a full minute the three men maintained their relative positions—Austin Handy with a look of unalterable determination upon his thin, hard face, the two schemers with facial expressions indicative of sickening disgust and fear.

In this supreme moment, when brought to the crucial test, the oft-vaunted "nerve" of the precious pair had winged an ignominious flight, leaving them weak and trembling, utterly powerless to lift a hand to grapple with their awful peril.

Austin Handy was the first to speak.

"Gentlemen, I hold the edge," he observed, in a cold, matter-of-fact tone, the deadly glow deepening in his blue eyes. "It is hardly necessary, I know, thus to call your attention to the fact, but such a trifling precaution may be the means of averting a—a—well, a fatal accident, we'll say."

"I dare say the situation is not all that could be wished, to either of you; but I've got an oar to stick in, and I've pretty good reasons for suspecting that you'll listen patiently until I'm through."

Then, to the utter surprise and bewilderment of his two bearers, Major Jordan gave vent to an unctuous little laugh. The words of Austin Handy had brought the villain to a full realization of all the dread contingencies of his position, and nerved him to a last desperate stand.

"We'll see about that, Frosty! We'll see about that!" he exclaimed, in an easy, insolent way, snapping his fingers in derision.

"The trouble just now with you, is that you've fallen into a common error of mankind and are attempting to count your chickens before they're hatched."

"You've got the drop on us in elegant shape, but you can't rely on your game till it's bagged."

"That's what's the matter!" McVay chimed in, becoming infected with the spirit of his ally.

"We're two to one, and them're pretty big odds a muss of this kind."

"I reckon when you come to squint at the matter in its proper light, you'll parley before setting loose the dogs of war!"

Austin Handy's thin lips curled contemptuously.

"I am not at all alarmed," he averred, in the

the same cold, steady strains in which he had first spoken. "There can be no half-way measures in this matter. I shall either come off completely victorious, or die in the struggle—it matters little which."

"I came prepared to meet you on an equal footing, Major Jordan—or Sharper Hidefast, just as you choose to call yourself—leaving behind me, to be opened in twenty-four hours in case I do not return, a plain statement of my coming here to wrest from you the secret of the murder of the detective."

"If I fall, your neck will pay the forfeit; and at the same time, by means of a confession embodied in the document left behind me, young Phil Atherton will secure all that is justly his."

"Strike, Sharper Hidefast, but with my death crumbles your brilliant scheme for a fortune!"

The arch-plotter uttered an oath.

"What would you have us do, Austin Handy?" he demanded.

"Surrender yourselves for the murder of my nephew, Corbin Handy," was the swiftly-uttered reply.

The next instant the mine-owner madly leaped forward, a sharp, snarling cry bursting from between his hard-set teeth.

A darkness as dense and black as that of fabled Erebus had suddenly descended over the room, thanks to the watchfulness of Don McVay, and the magnate was stripped of the advantage he had gained!

Goaded almost to frenzy, the latter yet retained the presence of mind not to open fire—not to waste his lead on vacant space. He was fully conscious that his was a most desperate strait—that naught but the most adroit maneuvering and sure good fortune could carry him through.

He expected no quarter—would show none.

After that first mad leap toward the center of the apartment, he halted, turned at right angles, and glided silently toward the door.

Not three paces had he gone, when a pair of strong hands closed tightly about his wrists, slipping down and wresting the revolvers from his grasp, in the twinkling of an eye.

And simultaneously the long, supple fingers of a second assailant entwined themselves around his throat, from the rear, and Austin Handy was helplessly in the power of his deadly foes!

But if he must die, he would die game. Vainly he struggled, putting forth almost superhuman strength; the long, cruel fingers about his throat held him in a grasp of iron, gradually enshrouding his mental vision in a pall of inky blackness—shutting down tighter and tighter, until he hung inert and helpless, little more than lifeless clay!

"The light, Don—quick!" uttered a sharp, rasping voice, scarcely recognizable as that of Major Jordan. "I don't want the cove to croak on my hands!"

A hasty shuffling of feet, the crackling ignition of a match, and in a moment Don McVay had relighted the lamp.

A glance at the livid face of the mine-owner showed that he was in a state of insensibility.

"That was a close call, Don—closer than I ever care to experience," observed the major, as he cautiously deposited his burden on the floor. "Frosty has outdone himself to-night."

"Give me those bracelets, and rig up a gag. We'll fix him beyond the possibility of his giving us further trouble."

"Why not put him out of the way at once, and have done with it?" suggested McVay.

"We must first secure that paper of which he spoke," was the response. "We'll take him out to Cobden's cabin for the present."

A few minutes sufficed to secure their victim, and then the two scoundrels sat down at the table, a bottle and glasses between them, to await his return to consciousness.

Not long had they to wait. The mine-owner opened his eyes, and glanced around in a bewildered way.

"Come, let us be off; the cove is himself again," said Jordan, rising from the table. "Reconnoiter the hall and the stairway, Don, while I get the gentleman onto his feet."

McVay complied.

"The coast is clear," he reported, a moment later.

CHAPTER IX.

THE BITER BITEN.

"KENT KANE, call the roll. Break camp, and have the lads in readiness to move in half an hour."

Little Lightning was the speaker; the person addressed, his twin brother, a slender youth with blue eyes and long, light-brown hair.

A stirring scene it was—the night camp of the Prairie Invincibles—the golden rays of the rising sun lay athwart. All was bustle and activity, without noise or confusion.

The spot was a secluded one, by no means easy of access—hemmed in on the north by a wall of solid rock with a sheer rise of a hundred feet ere breaking into a succession of short slopes and deep terraces, while to the east, south and southwest, swept the restless current of a broad, shallow stream tributary to the Wisdom River.

The natural advantages of the place had drawn the young rangers thither, direct from Yankee's Find, after the dashing rescue of Powder Phil; and here would be their rendezvous until the ending of their campaign against the Vultures.

Our hero was there, beside the young ranger chief, while a few paces distant, bending over a small camp-fire, stood the stanch-hearted old Hercules, Laughing Luke.

"Come, Phil," continued Little Lightning, as his brother turned to execute his command; "We'll mount and scout down toward the Golden Flats trail. I'm just pining away for a glimpse of Black Boone and his Vultures."

As he spoke, he led the way to the horses, closely followed by Phil, across whose face there flitted just the shadow of a smile.

"Well, I confess that I'm not exactly anxious for such a fracas as you suggest," the latter observed, as they singled out their steeds. "This Black Boone has the name of a fire-eater, and—Well, with all its miseries, life is sweet!"

The young ranger shot a swift glance at the face of his companion.

"Life is sweet, with all its troubles," he repeated. "Never mind, pard! we'll let no grass grow under our feet in knocking the kinks out of your trail!"

"I've thought the matter over, and I've about made up my mind that something's going to happen."

"But—mount, and let's off. We can swap chin music as we go."

The next moment our young heroes were in the saddle, riding away at a swift pace to the northwest, following the course of the brawling rivulet.

"Now fire away," cried Little Lightning, half-turning in the saddle. "Let's reach some sort of an understanding while the chance is open.

"I confess that I'm as much in the dark about some things as you are about others."

"Who sent you to my rescue last night?" queried Phil.

"Your mother," was the quiet reply. "Less than an hour after you had arranged to appear at the Great American Hotel to assist Hawkshaw, the detective, she staggered into our cabin, almost breathless, saying that you were being tried for murder."

"As soon as we had heard her story, we reached the conclusion that you were the victim of a put-up job, and at once decided upon a plan of action."

"For which I am duly thankful," fervently declared Phil. "Ugh! I can feel Dahlgren's confounded halter yet!"

"No doubt. But—"

The sentence abruptly broke off, never to be completed. In the same breath, Little Lightning flung himself forward in the saddle and grasped the reins of Phil's horse, bringing both steeds to a halt so suddenly as to send them back upon their haunches.

"Steady, pard!" he ejaculated, in low, intense tones. "Look to your guns—there's fun ahead! Gosh! another minute, and we'd 'a' been right among 'em!"

"The Vultures?"

"Dahlgren's men! I sighted Jim Spicer skulkin' in the brush. Reckon they've lifted our trail and are tryin' to edge in on us. They want you."

"Then leave the matter to be settled between us," suggested Phil. "It is worse than folly to run yourselves into trouble on my account."

"Nonsense! we'll do nothin' of the kind," asserted the young ranger, energetically. "They'd hang you quicker'n a wink. Didn't I see Major Jordan pick up your bowie on the bluff yesterday afternoon? An' don't I know that he's at the bottom of this whole measly business?"

"Nay, nay, Phil Atherton! Little Lightning an' his pards are with you to the death! Go back on a friend? We're not built that way, Phil!"

"Follow me!" And wheeling his horse, the bold youth set off at a sharp pace toward the camp of the Invincibles, closely followed by Phil.

But the latter was determined that the prairie nomads should not become further involved in his fight for life against the Vigilantes, tools of his unscrupulous rival, Major Jordan.

Reared to depend upon himself alone, brave and self-reliant, he was not the lad to face danger behind his friends. He would not return to the camp, to bring down upon the Invincibles the further enmity of the Vigilantes.

"They make no pursuit," Little Lightning observed, throwing a searching glance over his shoulder. "Spicer and two or three others were probably sent ahead to reconnoiter."

"Quite likely," briefly assented Phil.

The next moment they swerved sharply to the north, to avoid a dense thicket. Here was the opportunity courted by the young miner. Cut off from the view of his enemies in the rear, he slipped from the saddle, and in an instant's time was snugly hidden in the undergrowth.

Wholly unsuspecting of such an action on the part of his friend, Little Lightning spurred ahead, closely followed by the riderless horse, and was soon lost to view.

Phil uttered an ejaculation of relief.

"I almost hate to do it," he muttered, turning and pushing rapidly through the tangle. "It seems almost like deserting them in a moment of peril. And yet, if they are attacked, they will find me missing."

I will reconnoiter the position of the Vigilantes, and remain in the vicinity until I learn what will be the result of last night's work to the Invincibles."

Looking to his weapons, our hero glided stealthily through the woods, heading toward the point at which Jim Spicer had been seen.

It was comparatively an easy task to approach the spot undetected, to one so thoroughly an adept in woodcraft as Powder Phil.

Despite the tangled undergrowth and the roughness of the way, he advanced quite rapidly, and in an almost incredibly short time had reached a point slightly in advance of that at which Little Lightning had made the discovery.

"Spicer must be near at hand," he mused, crouching low and peering sharply around. "He stood near the roots of yon overturned tree; and yet, I see nothing of him now."

"He could hardly have followed Little Lightning in the direction of the camp, for I have kept a keen lookout, and he has not passed, unless by a wide *detour*."

"No; he is either ensconced behind the fallen tree, or has returned to report our presence to Dark Dahlgren."

"If he is hidden by the tree, I will discover his position and hold him under surveillance until I learn his object. Should he have returned to the Vigilantes, I will trail him to their camp."

"For I must know Dark Dahlgren's object—must stand between him and the Invincibles."

Bending low, the dauntless youth again pushed forward, bringing into play all the stealth and cunning he could command.

Not twenty paces had he gone, however, when he was startled by a sharp, hissing sound, and the next instant the coils of a lasso settled around his shoulders, almost jerking him off his feet!

"Aha! me laddy-buck!" exclaimed a hoarse voice behind him. "Ye're lookin' fer Jim Spicer, be ye? Wa-al, ye nee'n't er go furder—ye've found him!"

Startled though he was, Phil yet retained his presence of mind. The next instant he wheeled and faced his captor, a dangerous sparkle in his gray eyes.

An ugly-looking ruffian it was he confronted—a gaunt, grizzled fellow, with an evil, lowering face on which were indelible traces of dissipation. He was clad in a rugged suit of blue jeans, and about his middle hung a belt of arms.

"Reckon ye've got it in fer me 'kase I follered ther cap'n's orders last night an' took ye in," continued the desperado, in a sneering tone, as he advanced step by step, holding the lasso taut. "Jes' like ye, ter creep up an' stick a knife in my back! I dropped ter yer leetle game, soon as ye turned an' rode off, back thar. Ef—"

There he stopped—shrinking back with an expression akin to horror on his cadaverous visage!

The muzzle of a revolver stared him directly between the eyes—a revolver grasped by the band of Powder Phil!

"I 'low es how ye're aout too fur, Blue Jeans!" exclaimed the youth, mimicking the tones of the ruffian. "'Pears es how ye'd taken ther wrong bull by ther horns!"

"That's w'ot!" Spicer assented, with a sickly attempt at a smile. "I say, leetle pard, let's call the thing squar', an' let ther bull matter drop!"

"Nay, nay!" quoth Phil, throwing off the coils of the lasso with his left hand. "You've paid the fiddler—now you must dance."

"Up with your hands!"

Inwardly cursing his failure to make a sure throw, Jim Spicer mutely obeyed. The next moment he was disarmed and securely pinioned.

These precautionary measures completed, Phil seated himself upon the trunk of a fallen tree, and, revolver in hand, gazed steadily at his luckless captive a full minute, bending upon him such a look as made his blood run cold.

"It isn't such a deed as I like," soliloquized our hero, in a barely audible tone, "but if I don't put the spying cuss out of the way, my own neck will pay the forfeit."

"These fellows have terrible odds against me, and, with no means of learning their plans, I must resort to every end—even to killing an unarmed man."

And with the last words he arose and advanced swiftly toward Spicer.

The *ruse*, simple as it was, worked to perfection. The Vigilante, his face paling to an ashen hue, grasped at the chance suggested as a drowning man at a straw.

"Hold! I will talk!" he exclaimed, his voice quivering in spite of himself.

CHAPTER X.

THE TABLES TURNED.

"OH! you'll peach the game, will you!" observed Phil, sneeringly. "Blue Jeans, I'm becoming enamored of you. You're such a model ruffian!"

"Here you've gone and played your master's game right up to the handle—to turn and give the whole snap away at the first sniff of burning powder."

"You're no good, you scoundrel! I wouldn't believe you under oath. It's of no use to waste words—you're better out of the world than in it!"

Once more Phil advanced, such a look on his stern young face that Spicer, coward that he was, fairly quailed. Bold enough was the ruffian when fired with liquor and surrounded by his fellows; but just now he was his sober self, and alone. Then, too, he had a wholesome fear of the brawny, impetuous young miner. To escape the latter's wrath he stood ready to divulge everything.

"Hang me fer a hoss-thief if ye ketch me a-lyin'!" he cried, hastily. "Reckon ye kin' most tell ef I speak with a straight tongue, Phil Atherton, fer ye ain't a fool by a long shot!"

"Ef my pards hed 'a' stayed by me, I'd 'a' died afore I'd 'a' squealed; but they hain't lived up ter theyre word, an' durn me! ef I'm a-goin' ter grin an' bear et all!"

"Guv me jest a chaintce, leetle pard, an' may ther kiotes hev my carcase ef I don't spin ye a straight yarn!"

Satisfied; from the intense earnestness of Spicer's tones, that he had succeeded in getting his victim wrought up to the proper pitch, Phil stood for a moment as if undecided, then said curtly:

"Go ahead! Tell the truth, and I will spare your life; tell me a lie, and you won't live to add to it!"

"Nary a ghost story, boss!" said Spicer, assuredly, with relief apparent in voice and feature.

"Let me tell ye, right at ther start, though, that this hyar aire a mighty unhealthy neighborhood fer ye. Dahlgren an' his men aire apt ter happen 'long hyar 'most any minute."

"I'll risk that. Go ahead."

"Wa-al, then, ye hain't guilty ov ther murder ye war accused ov last night—an' I opine ther Dahlgren knows et, too!"

"Who killed the stranger?"

"Ye hev a rival?" suggested Spicer.

"Major Jordan?"

"Yea, that's ther awdashus willun! He put up ther keerds, an' did ther job. He kalkilated ye'd leave camp or hang."

"Then, as I have left the camp, why am I pursued by Dahlgren?"

"Y' ain't."

Phil stared hard at the ruffian, an incredulous expression creeping across his face.

"They hain't sayin' a word, s'long as ye keep 'way from Yankee's Find," hastily averred Spicer, in continuance. "But should they run ag'in' ye, w'y—Wa-al, I w'u'dn't keer ter be in yer shoes, I reckon!"

"If they are not in pursuit, what are they doing out here?" demanded our hero. "And what do you mean, dogging my trail?"

For the first time Spicer hesitated, casting about him a fearful glance. It was evident that

he was on the verge of making a most startling disclosure.

"Speak it out!" Phil exclaimed, sharply, his two eyes meeting the pale, colorless orbs of the desperado with a look of fixed determination. "You must talk or die!"

Spicer nodded sullenly, while a muttered oath slipped from between his set teeth.

"I said as how I'd peach this hull thing—an' I'll do it!" he gritted. "Either way, I won't find it healthy 'round there hyar parts no more."

"S'pose ye've hearn ov Black Boone's Vultures? Wa-al, Dark Dahlgren, an' his Vigilantes aire—"

A faint tremor ran through the desperado, and his eyes sought the ground, a crafty glitter in their pale depths. The sentence died unfinished on his lips.

In an instant, Powder Phil was on the alert. Spicer's action portended danger.

"This mornin', the hearse fer Golden Flats war ter take Old Frosty's bullion," went on the Vigilante, looking up with listless eyes. "W'at more likely than that Dahlgren's men sh'u'd see ther it that ther Vulture didn't gobble up this outfit?"

"Wa-al, myself an' two others got excused from duty, after we'd took ther trail ahead ov ther hearse, fer we'd got on—heads together an' putt up a leetle job ov our own."

"An' that's w'ot brought me hyar. We war ter lay fer ye, take ye in, an' then hol' ye over ther head ov Major Jordan. We kalkilated es how he'd come down heavy."

"My pards aire back a half-mile, in ther fresh. Now, of—"

Again the desperado stopped in the middle of a sentence—this time with an exultant chuckle.

Phil wheeled squarely around, a fierce gleam in his eyes. The sharp crackling of a dry twig not three paces away had reached his ear.

Too late!

From tree to tree, from covert to covert, two men had glided forward with the soft tread of the panther, drawing nearer and nearer their prey. At the very instant our hero turned, a heavy revolver-butt descended upon his head with crushing force, sending him half-senseless to the earth.

Again had the tables turned—again was Powder Phil a prisoner.

A stranger sat in the accustomed place of Laughing Luke on the rumbling old stage-coach—a stranger to all within the confines of Yankee's Find, yet one who handled the ribbons as one "to the manner born."

Whence he came, no one knew—no one cared. The coach must be pulled through to Golden Flats, and, after some deliberation and a brief consultation with the superintendent of the Bonanza King Mine, the company's agent had bargained with this stranger to make the round trip.

Ezekiel Barrabone, he had said his name was—a prospector decidedly "down on his luck," yet as handy with his pistol as the pick, the rifle as the ribbons.

He "allowed as how he'd beered ov Black Boone's Vultures," and he "reckoned as how they'd not keer ter run ag'in' Old Zeke Barrabone twicet!" This in a quiet way, direct to the company's agent.

And so the old hearse rolled out of Yankee's Find an hour after sunrise, with Old Barrabone perched snugly upon the box blowing a cloud from his short, black pipe. Inside were Colonel Bundy, the landlord of the Great American Hotel, and a Vigilante known as Paul Prendle.

The colonel was hardly his usual seedy-looking self as he sat puffing away at his morning cheroot, with his podgy hands driven deep into his pockets. There was a sort of stiff, prim look about him, and the genial twinkle in his blue eyes had given way to an expression half-moody, half-sullen.

Prendle, on the other hand, seemed invested with an unusual degree of affability.

For upwards of two hours the old coach had bowled along, traversing nearly half the distance intervening between the two camps. Then the trail entered a narrow gorge, winding and tortuous, the sides of which were covered with a dense growth of strangely-gnarled and knotted timber.

"Sure, an' now's our time ter look sharp—right hyar in Purgatory Pass!" observed Paul Prendle, casting a significant glance at his fellow-passenger. "It is hyar the Vultures allers swoop down on their prey!"

"Much good it 'ill do 'em to-day!" returned the colonel, almost curtly.

The next instant a perfect torrent of profanity broke from the bearded lips of Old Barrabone,

in strains high and shrill, to be followed by the sudden stoppage of the coach.

"There! Black Boone—"

"Hands up, Jehu! You'll die game if you attempt to scale the barricade with your old hearse!" rung out a stern voice, coming in upon the hasty words of Prendle, as from the undergrowth on each side leaped a number of masked men with weapons cocked and leveled. "Stand and deliver, all! Draw, and you die!"

"Kernel, w'ot—"

"Jes' nothin', Paul Prendle! It ain't my say-so, an' I ain't liftin' a finger! I smelt it afore I got aboard ther huss—an' I'm pore as poverty!" with a chuckle.

"Dern me! ef I be, kernel! They'll git a heap-sight more than I kin afford ter losel! Ef ye're game fer—"

"Don't attempt to pull a weapon, pilgrims!" interpolated the voice of Black Boone, as the door of the coach swung open, to reveal that redoubtable road-agent. "Step down and out, with hands up and empty. Lively now!—no use to kick!"

"Thet's w'ot—et's too late fer that!" Prendle assented, his valor suddenly vanishing under the black and frowning muzzles staring him in the face. "Kernel, will ye lead the way?"

"Thanks, no; I will follow," returned Bundy, just the trace of a smile hovering on his pursed-up lips. "Move on—don't keep the gentleman waitin'!"

A slight scowl flitted across Prendle's face. For a fleeting instant his tigerish yellow orbs met the dark eyes of the road-agent chief in a look fraught with deep and deadly significance.

Swift as was that exchange of glances, it did not escape the keen eyes of Colonel Bundy.

He sat bolt-upright between his fellow-passenger and Black Boone, his head turned so that both were just within view. His hands were empty.

With apparent reluctance, Prendle moved toward the door of the coach.

At the very instant he passed Bundy, loud and clear from across the barricade blocking the trail came the words:

"Ho there, Jehu! Draw and defend the coach!"

"Down with the Vultures, for their last hour has come!"

The deathly rattle of Winchesters followed, so quickly as almost to mingle with the words.

Paul Prendle and the outlaw captain stood agast.

"Quick!" shouted the latter. "Quick! or it is too late! We must retreat!"

Drawing a long blade from his belt, Prendle turned upon the colonel—to be met with a blow, delivered squarely between the eyes, that sent him reeling from the coach falling against Black Boone!

The next instant, the doughty colonel was on the ground, revolvers in hand, face to face with the chief of the Vultures!

CHAPTER XI.

THE ARCH-PLOTTER'S MASTERSTROKE.

The shades of night had fallen over the camp of Yankee's Find, and clouds thick and black shut out every ray of starlight. The wind came in swirling gusts, and anon a vivid flash of lightning portended a coming storm.

The streets of the camp were well-nigh deserted. Here and there, with unsteady steps, a miner wended his way from one of the "all-night shebangs" to his cabin home.

Silence deep and oppressive brooded over the outskirts of the camp—over the humble hut of the Widow Atherton—over the pretentious domicile of Austin Handy. The rushing of the wind, the dull rumble of thunder, the distant whooping of some drunken miner, alone broke the dismal quietude.

Within the magnate's library, half-hidden in the luxurious depths of a great chair, reclined pretty Della Handy. Her long eyelashes swept her flushed cheeks, and her breast rose and fell with unvarying regularity.

She slept.

Long had she sat thus, her heart heavy with misery, awaiting the coming of Old Frosty—vainly striving to conjecture the fate of the handsome boy lover, Powder Phil.

For Austin Handy had been missing since the night before; and current report had it that young Atherton was fleeing for his life before Dark Dahlgren and his Vigilantes.

Just at dusk Della had returned from a lengthy conference with Mrs. Atherton, at the latter's home, and taken up her lonely vigil in the library.

For hours she had sat thus, a prey to the direst of thoughts; then sleep, "that knits up,

the raveled sleeve of care," came stealthily to her weary eyes and locked her in slumber's chain.

Time slipped by with rapid pace, until a clock in an adjoining apartment tolled forth the hour of one. Then a door opened noiselessly, and into the silent library glided a tall, sinewy fellow, whose face was effectually concealed by the folds of a dark mask.

On the threshold he paused an instant, as if undecided, peering sharply at the face of the sleeping girl.

"She sleeps, and it is well," he muttered, moving forward with cat-like tread. "The slightest cry would have brought the servants about our ears and forced a fight.

"Ab, my sleeping beauty, you little knew with whom you were trifling when you rejected the advances of Major Jordan!"

"From the first I swore you should be mine, by fair means or foul, and this night shall see the fulfillment of that vow."

"Sh! Death! she moves—I must hasten, or the game is lost!"

Hapless Della Handy! Even through sleep's mystic veil the evil presence confronting her seemed to force an intuition of peril, bringing in its train a shiver of horror.

The daring outlaw swooped forward, as a vulture upon its prey, his black eyes glowing vividly. The girl moved uneasily; her eyes opened, her lips parted, giving utterance to an inarticulate sound of terror. Then she fell back in the chair, silent, insensible—drugged!

"There! the trick is worked!" exclaimed Jordan, exultantly, as he replaced the sponge in his pocket. "With the rising of to-morrow's sun Old Frosty's ward will be missing, with not a clew to her whereabouts."

And, stooping, he seized Della Handy in his powerful arms and bore her silently from the library.

Just beyond the door opening into the hall stood a sentry. At the outer door another was encountered. Together the three marauders left the house and sought their horses.

Mounting, they rode slowly and silently down the winding street of the camp, the muffled hoofs of the animals giving forth no sound.

Straight out the Golden Flats trail they rode, breaking into a sharp gallop just beyond the confines of the camp.

A short, exultant laugh broke from the lips of Major Jordan.

"Dan!"

"Well, major?"

"It seems to me that we have made a clean sweep."

"A clean sweep. We have the paper and the girl."

"But what is the next step we are to take?"

Again Major Jordan laughed.

"The next step is a matrimonial venture," he returned.

"You mean—"

"That Parson Patrock here shall tie the knot to-night. Then there can be no slip 'twixt cup and lip!"

Don McVay averted his face. There was a mad gleam in his eyes it was well the others did not see.

"And Old Frosty?" he queried a moment later his voice low and strained.

"His race is run," was the cool reply. "He must be gotten rid of in some way."

A deep silence followed the atrocious declaration. Hardened as they were, Don McVay and Parson Patrock felt ill at ease.

Onward rode the party, their way illuminated at brief intervals by vivid flashes of lightning. The wind died away, and a slow, steady rain began to fall.

At this juncture, the daring desperadoes turned from the winding trail into a narrow path leading off into the woods, McVay taking the lead and the parson bringing up the rear. In this order they pushed forward for upward of an hour, traversing a considerable distance, and moving through the dense gloom as if perfectly familiar with their surroundings.

"There's the cabin, just ahead," suddenly announced McVay, halting. "Shall we push forward or advance afoot?"

"Go ahead—Black Boone and his men are there," said Major Jordan.

"Yes, push on—I'm soaked to the skin," grumbled the parson.

McVay accordingly pushed ahead, laying his course directly toward a dim light twinkling through the reeking darkness.

A moment later the hail rung out, stern and sharp:

"Ho, there! Halt and give an account of yourselves!"

"We're pilgrims, bound for Jordan!" was the instant response.

"Welcome, pilgrims! Advance!"

McVay and his companions rode up to the cabin, where they halted and dismounted, turning their animals over to the sentry.

"Lead the way, Don, and quick—I'm chilled to the bone!" exclaimed Major Jordan, staggering under the weight of the girl.

The gambler obeyed, pushing open the door and crossing the threshold at a bound, closely followed by the archplotter and the parson—the trio to find themselves in the midst of a group of armed men, headed by no less a personage than Dark Dahlgren!

CHAPTER XII.

A STARTLING DISCOVERY.

"Up with your hands, Black Boone! Attempt to fire, and you're a dead man!"

Smoothly, swiftly, the words shot from between the grimly-compressed lips of Colonel Bundy, as he stood confronting the outlaw chief at the rear of the stage.

The colonel held the "drop," too—owing to the headlong fall of treacherous Paul Prendle from the doorway of the coach—and that he meant to make the most of his advantage was evident from the steely glitter of his blue eyes.

All around was the wildest confusion—shouts, yells and curses commingling with the dull roar of almost continuous firing.

Old Barrabone sat upon the box of the coach, a six in each hand, firing right and left into the ranks of the Vultures, and all the while whooping like a veritable demon. Just beyond the barricade were two horsemen—bold, dashing-looking fellows—from whose leveled Winchesters came a regular fusilade. But a moment had elapsed since their hail had apprised the occupants of the stage of help; but in that moment the Vultures had massed themselves, determined to make a desperate fight to capture the bullion they believed the old vehicle contained.

And thus it was that the colonel and the chief of the outlaws were left facing each other, with the senseless body of Paul Prendle lying between them.

A cry, a word, from the lips of Black Boone would have attracted his followers to his side; but the redoubtable road-agent disdained—perhaps feared—to call for help. It was man against man, and the desperado felt morally sure the odds were even yet in his favor.

True, Bundy had him covered; but then the jovial boniface was not generally accredited with proficiency in the use of the tools, or even with the possession of an ordinary degree of nerve.

"But events were to prove that Black Boone was dangerously wrong in his premises—that placid Colonel Bundy possessed a bold heart and a cunning brain.

For a full minute after the utterance of that sharp command with which the present chapter opens, the two men stared each other in the eye—the dark orbs of the desperado baleful and full of fire.

"Up with my hands, eh?" he uttered, in a hoarse, strained tone, assumed to disguise his voice. "Why, certainly, colonel, since you request it! Anything to oblige, even—"

Crack!

The spiteful report of Bundy's revolver broke in on the sneering words, and a snarling oath filled the hiatus in the outlaw's speech.

"Up with your hands!" sternly reiterated the colonel, the smoking muzzle of his weapon shifting to cover the heart of Black Boone.

"Your case is hopeless; you're my meat!"

"You've tried to work your trigger trick, and lost. Let your gun lay there. You must go with me, dead or alive!"

The Vulture, starting as if stung, stared hard at his captor.

"Vengeance of Heaven! who are you?" he gritted, half in fear, half in defiance.

The colonel uttered a peculiar little laugh.

"We have met before, Black Boone, and under vastly different circumstances," he averred.

"I am—"

"Bolly Darrit!"

The name fell from the outlaw's tongue with explosive force. His dark eyes filled with a sudden blaze of rage.

"Exactly! Bolly Darrit, the Mountain Detective!" was the quiet response. "I've run you to earth at last, Bullion Bill, and I reckon your crooked trail is ended."

"Nor is that all, for at this moment your outlaw clan is well-nigh surrounded; for, last night, I revealed myself to my old allies, Little

Lightning and his Invincibles, and they have you completely hemmed in!"

"Not so!" cried Black Boone, exultantly. "For yonder comes Little Lightning and his young vagabonds!"

True enough; five hundred yards down the trail were the prairie nomads, sweeping like the wind toward the beleaguered coach.

A shade of annoyance flitted across the detective's face. Had his plans miscarried? Even as he stood half in doubt, he suddenly toppled forward across the body of Paul Prendle, stricken down by a blow from behind.

"Fall back—retreat!" shouted Black Boone, bounding swiftly toward the undergrowth.

"Quick, or you'll stretch hemp!"

A moment later, just as Little Lightning drew rein at the rear of the stage, the last of the Vultures had disappeared, abandoning the attack as hopeless.

But a tithe of the time required to narrate them in, were these incidents in enactment. Yet two of the road-agents lay face-downward in the middle of the trail, and Old Barrabone had not escaped unscathed, having received a pistol-ball in the fleshy part of his left forearm. The two strangers ahead, sheltered by the barricade, had passed the fight unburnt.

"Kent, take three men an' jump the trail ov those fellows—hot-foot!" cried Little Lightning to his brother, as he swung from the saddle to the side of the fallen detective. "We'll be up with you in a twinklin'!"

"You bet we will!" gritted Old Barrabone savagely, as he dropped upon his knees beside the colonel. "An' say, leetle pard," addressing Little Lightning, "mebbe 'twouldn't be a bad idea ter look afer ther cusses t'other side ov ther barricade. Reckon they're straight goods; but—"

"Straight as a bee-line—all wool and a yard wide!" quickly interposed a voice behind the driver. "Don't bother your heads about us, gentlemen."

Little Lightning faced swiftly about.

"Hello! hello!" he ejaculated, nonplussed at the sudden and unexpected appearance of the mounted strangers. "Whence came you—who are you, gentlemen?"

"These are troubous times on the Golden Flats trail, and a prompt explanation of your presence here just at this time, may save you annoyance."

The smaller one of the two men nodded lightly, a pleasant smile parting his mustached lips.

"You are nothing if not outspoken, captain!" he exclaimed dryly.

"But it is better so, as we have nothing to conceal. We are—"

Just then, the doughty colonel, who had struggled to a sitting posture, with his trembling blue eyes fixed full upon the face of the speaker, sprung to his feet, his rubicund visage all aglow, exclaiming:

"Rock ov Ages! Ef 'tain't—Put 'er thar, Pard Richard! A good five years sence I see'd yer last—an' I reckon it'll sharpen my pore ole eyes to look at ye!"

"Shake! Bolly, old man!" responded Dick St. Clair, bending low in the saddle, to cross palms with the veteran detective. "And here is a friend of mine—Tom Swift."

"Red Swift! Glory! Ef we ain't four ov a kind, that condemned rascal, Black Boone, is a saint! Pards!"—with an unctuous bow—"permit me. Old Dan Rackhoss, the one, only an' unapproachable!"

Old Barrabone strode forward, a broad grin on his homely face, and acknowledged the florid introduction.

"These hyar cherubims," continued Darrit, indicating Little Lightning and such of the Invincibles as remained, "are wuss nor a baydoogin of wildcats on the trail, an'—"

A yell of alarm—a quick rush—the sharp, spiteful cracking of a half-dozen revolvers, broke in upon the rambling utterances of the old detective, causing him to face about with a weapon in each hand—only to recoil with a sound akin to an oath.

Treacherous Paul Prendle was gone!

"Baste me a few, some ov ye!" Darrit groaned as the young prairie nomads plunged through the undergrowth in hot pursuit. "I'm an old woman—a fool! A babblin', gossippin' idiot!"

"Prezactly!" growled Old Dan Rackhoss, in disgust. "Ther fat's all in ther fire, *sure!*"

Bully Darrit uttered a dolorous sigh.

"That's w'at!" he assented. "But, I'll tell ye w'at, pard, ef them thar boyees don't give ther skunk a tall hustle fer life an' liberty, then they'll jst break a leetle ther purtiest record I ever see!"

St. Clair looked askance.

"Who are the lads, Bolly?" he queried.

"Little Lightning an' his band—jest a swarm ov galumphin' hornets they be, too," was the prompt response.

Red Swift and his ally exchanged a significant glance.

"Ye see, Rackhoss hyar an' myself hed bin a-layin' fer one Bullion Bill, a notorious road-agent," Darrit continued, softly stroking the back of his head. "We run him down as far as Yankee's Find, an' thar we lost him."

"But we soon scented our game in one Black Boone, a toll-taker on this trail, an' we set to work to catch ther gentleman nappin'."

"We suspected that ther outlaw's headquarters war right in ther camp, an' that he war one ov ther chiefs ov ther place. Now we know it!"

"Old Dan kept shady, but I pegged away on ther case, posin' as Colonel Bundy, ov ther Great American Hotel, until I saw we c'u'dn't turn a winnin' keerd *that* way. So last night we got our heads tergether, an' decided to try to work ther rifle another way."

"We know'd ther Vultures would tackle ther coach, for it had leaked out that Old Frosty war goin' to send out a consignment ov bullion. Ther naixt thing war ter set ther trap."

"An' we set it!"

Then, dropping the vernacular as suddenly as he had assumed it upon the approach of the two detectives, Darrit briefly narrated the stirring events of the preceding night in Yankee's Find, as nearly as he knew them, stating, in addition, that he and Old Dan Rackhoss had secured the services of Little Lightning and his followers for the closing scene of the drama—Black Boone's attack on the hearse.

"But things went wrong," he said, in conclusion. "Something detained the Invincibles, and the Vultures have given us the slip. Only for the appearance of you fellows so opportunely, Old Dan and myself might now have been forever off the trail."

"Don't mention it!" exclaimed St. Clair, smiling easily. "Such fortunate little things will happen, you know, and the present instance only goes to show that good may come of evil."

"You see, the stranger killed in Yankee Find last night was our pard, and we were on our way there to avenge his death, as well as to prosecute a search for certain parties, when we ran upon the barricade."

"The state of affairs dawned upon us very quickly, and we at once opened fire."

"With good effect, too," observed Dan, with a significant glance at the fallen road-agents.

"But, I say, Bolly—we'd better be a-doin' something, ef we're goin' ter be up with ther Vultures at ther death."

"So we had," acquiesced the old detective, glancing at the sun. "Just cut the horses from the hearse while I take a look at these fellows in the trail."

"Gents, you'll join us, I suppose?"

"Willingly," St. Clair averred.

Rackhoss turned to secure the horses, while Bolly Darrit gave his attention to the dead Vultures.

"Dan!" he cried, sharply, the next moment, springing erect with a mask clutched nervously in his fingers. "Dan, we've struck pay dirt—struck it the biggest way!"

"Black Boone's Vultures and the Vigilantes of Yankee's Find are one and the same!"

Old Dan Rackhoss stood agast!

"Jus' so, I reckon!" he muttered, forcing the words with an effort. "Wa-al, may I be dam-pened!"

Dick St. Clair and Red Swift exchanged a look fraught with intense significance.

"We're on the right trail!" uttered the former, smiling grimly.

CHAPTER XIII.

LUKE ON THE TRAIL.

"I RECKON we hev got ther young varlet dead ter rights this timel" exclaimed Jim Spicer, with a villainous chuckle, as he strode forward and dealt the prostrate form of Powder Phil a brutal kick. "Sa-ay, you fellers try yer hands on these hyar knots, will ye? Mighty uncomfortable, this rope is!"

"Pity 'tain't yer neck, 'stead ov yer hands!" surlily responded one of the ruffians. "A fine act ye've played, a-bringin' ther kid into camp!"

"Got 'im, hain't ye?" Spicer retorted, with a devilish grin. "To be honest about it, pards, I war a sight nigher bein' taken inter camp than ter bringin' in ther kid."

"Oh! he's a bowlin' whooper, he is—a rustler fresh an' hot from ther tropics! I reckon I'm

a purty big chief myself—but I got ther razzle-dazzle jest ther same!"

"An' ef so be es ye don't like it, Curly Bullock, thar's no time like ther present!"

"I ain't sayin' a word!" the outlaw hurriedly protested. "Excuse me, but I'm not in the chief line."

"Nor I," declared the second ruffian, as he cut away the last of Spicer's bonds. "Twas only one of Curly's jokes, Jim."

"Ov course, Danto," Spicer assented, chuckling. "You fellers c'u'dn't work ther leetle trick ahead ov us—an' ye know it."

"Oh! et takes a spry galoot 'th fine works in his garret, ter navigate sech a wrinkle es this, an' I'm thet same kind ov a hairpin!"

"But get ther lad up, pards, an' let's get a move on us. Them dratted mad-caps ov Little Lightning's ben't far away. We ain't hankerin' fer a bresh 'ith them fellers."

"I sh'u'd say not!" bastily averred Buck Danto, kneeling beside Powder Phil, and beginning the work of resuscitation. "We'd better strike a bee line fer Cobden's cabin, leavin' one kiver ther trail."

"Curly'll 'tend ter that," said Spicer, casting a wary glance at his surroundings. "An' mind you, Curly, ef 'tain't done right, we'll none ov us live ter finger ther major's dust fer this day's work!"

"Powder Phil an' Little Lightning aire big pards, an' when ther rangers find w't's in ther wind, they'll strike hot an' quick. So look ter et ther nothin's left ter guy ther snap away."

"Trust me fer that," Bullock returned. "I'll throw 'em cold, an' join you fellers at ther cabin ter-night."

"We'll be thar—"

"Hist!" cautioned Danto, lifting his hand. "The lad's bimself ag'in—on'y he's doin' ther possum act. Lay a bolt thar an' vank him up. Reckon we kin make him step et off 'bout right!"

At that juncture, Phil opened his eyes and stared blankly at the faces of the trio bending over him.

Evil faces they were, too—hard, cruel, vindictive—and the young miner, dazed as he was, realized that from his captors he had little to hope for.

The next moment he was jerked to his feet.

"Lead ther way, Danto, straight ter ther horses," uttered Spicer. "We'll follow in Injun file."

"Curly, run ther critter's trail back ter hard ground, then kiver from that p'int up."

Bullock nodded assent and moved away. Danto advanced, followed by Phil, and Jim Spicer brought up the rear.

A rapid walk of fifteen minutes brought the party to the borders of a dense thicket, forth from the recesses of which Danto led three horses.

Astride the back of one of these animals Phil was securely bound, after which the two outlaws mounted, and then the trio again pushed forward, at a sharp trot.

Knowing the futility of resistance, our hero had been passive in the hands of his captors. Silent and watchful, he could only bide his time, and, under a listless demeanor, learn all possible of the fate planned for him.

In possession of the full confidence of Little Lightning, he was aware that the young ranger and his followers had pledged their support to Bolly Darrit—a service which would render immediate pursuit of Jim Spicer and his allies impossible.

Upon his own exertions his escape depended, and the consciousness of that fact brought all his latent powers into activity.

Not until he drew rein in the midst of his startled followers, did Little Lightning discover that Phil's saddle was empty.

An instant he stared intently over his shoulder, and then a grim smile wreathed his thin red lips.

"Whar's Phil?" queried Laughing Luke, just a trace of anxiety noticeable in his deep tones.

"Yes, whar's our new pard?" Kent Kane supplemented, gliding forward as he observed the peculiar expression on his brother's face. "Have the—"

Little Lightning cut short the question with an impatient gesture.

"Alive and unharmed. I believe my friends," he replied, quickly. "We encountered the advance guard of the Vigilantes back there, and decided to put back to camp. On the way, Phil has slipped from the saddle and taken to the woods, determined to avert a conflict between the Vigilantes and ourselves at this time."

"From words be let fall, I know he has pursued the course I have indicated; and, as he is

well-armed, I think we need have no fear that he will come to grief.

"But, hasty now, and mount—work awaits us!"

Fully satisfied, Kent Kane and his fellows turned away to obey the command. Not a lad of them but believed Phil would rejoin their ranks ere nightfall.

But Laughing Luke lingered.

"Kane," he muttered, with a hasty glance to assure himself that the others were beyond hearing; "Kane, be ye sart'in no harm has come ter ther lad?"

"Quite sure, Luke; Phil isn't the lad to be easily tried," replied Little Lightning. "Barring accidents, we may look for him to join us again within a few hours."

"But, to make matters sure, we'll look up his trail when we break camp. A sight at it will tell the story."

Luke gravely inclined his head.

"I hope ye aire right," he muttered. "Anyhow, ef you fellers will look after my hoss, I'll go see ef I can't find the lad. Mebbe things ain't so smooth afore him as he thinks."

"My idea, exactly!" exclaimed the young ranger. "I was about to suggest it."

"Wa-al, then, ef nothin' happens, ye may expect us 'bout dusk."

And with a parting word, Laughing Luke strode away, while Little Lightning turned to join his fellows.

The lynx-eyed old Hercules experienced but little difficulty in locating the exact spot at which Phil had sprung from the saddle into the undergrowth, and the trail, once found, was easily followed.

And so it came about that, snugly hidden in a leafy covert just beyond earshot, he witnessed the departure of Jim Spicer and Buck Danto with their captive.

Nor did the wily maneuvering of Curly Bullock escape his closest attention.

"Thar's su'thin' condemned rotten 'bout this hyar little rifle!" was Laughing Luke's mental observation, slowly and deliberately formed, as he glanced from Bullock to the three men gliding away. "Hang me! they all be Vigilantes—wot kin be in the wind ter induce 'em ter kiver their trail like that?"

"Little Lightning an' his men? No; 'tain't that! Dark Dahlgren'd keer leetle whether or not he war foller'd by the Boy Rangers."

"Most likely these hyar varlets hev split off from ther main gang, an' aire working some wrinkle on theyre own hook—aire dodgin' Dahlgren an' ther Vigilantes as well as ther Boy Rangers!"

"If so, why? W'ot but ther major and his ducats, to be sure!"

Not long was Luke in reaching this conclusion—scarcely longer in deciding upon a plan of action.

In accordance therewith, he sunk yet lower in the leafy covert, a cocked revolver in his hand, his glowing eyes fixed upon Bullock's every move.

Then, in the twinkling of an eye, matters were brought to a crisis in a most startling and unexpected manner.

Startled by the cracking of a small dry twig under the knee of the giant spy, Bullock halted, not three paces away, and peered sharply into the recesses of the thicket—his eyes singling out and meeting, as if by intuition, the glowing orbs of Laughing Luke!

"Tracked!" he hissed, with a mad oath, as his hands swiftly sought the trusty weapons belted to his waist. "Woe to the spy!"

Quick as was the movement, the action of Laughing Luke eclipsed it. A single pantherish leap, and the old Hercules was fairly upon his foe, felling him senseless to the earth with a single stroke of his mighty arm.

"That settles you!" muttered Luke, gazing down at Bullock's distorted face. "Ther naixt thing is ter putt ye out ov ther way for a few hours."

And, with that end in view, he knelt and quickly knotted a buckskin thong about the wrists and ankles of the inanimate outlaw, after which he lifted him in his powerful arms and carried him into the midst of a dense thicket hard by.

"Now for ther trail," Luke continued, half-aloud, as he turned and strode in the direction taken by Jim Spicer and his ally. "Thar's no time ter be lost. Them varlets mean Phil no good!"

The two outlaws had taken due care to leave as slight trace of their passage as possible, despite the fact that Bullock was expected to cover their trail; yet to the keen eyes of Luke, their foot-prints were readily discernible, and with a

sharp hitch at his broad leathern girdle he set forward in pursuit at a swift, loping sort of run.

Halting a moment at the point where Spicer and his ally had mounted, the trailer made a hasty reconnaissance of the vicinity.

A grim smile crept over his bearded face.

"Jest as I thought," he mused, again moving forward. "Thar war only ther three in the gang. They left ther bosses hyar, an' pushed forward afoot.

"They be desperate critters, an' they're as anxious ter avoid ther Vigilantes as they are ther Invincibles.

"Ther capture ov Phil are a scheme ov their own hatchin', ter be paid for with Major Jordan's money. But I'll foil 'em yet—I'll foil 'em, ef it takes both loigs an' an arm!"

Poor Luke!—brave fellow! Little he dreamed the award awaiting him for his steadfast devotion!

CHAPTER XIV. THROUGH THICK AND THIN.

A HALF-SCORE miles from Yankee's Find in a deep dark defile, stood the rude wooden structure known in these pages as Cobden's cabin.

Built in against the face of a bluff, the outer walls and roof hidden by masses of clinging vines and the gnarled and knotted boughs of a clump of dwarfed trees, and approached only by a tortuous secret path, it easily escaped the notice of one passing through the canyon.

For years it had stood grim and untenanted, an uncanny spot, around which clustered many a fatal legend.

As a matter of fact, Jack Cobden, a notorious outlaw and renegade, had been its first occupant, making it his hiding-place until ferreted out and captured by no less a personage than the redoubtable mountain detective, Bolly Darrit.

Little more than a hovel, yet strongly built—its single door being provided with massive bars and the walls with loopholes—it was almost as uninviting in aspect as it was impregnable in reality.

To this place it was that Old Frosty, the magnate of Yankee's Find, had been conveyed by his unscrupulous captors, Major Jordan and Don McVay.

Shortly after noon of the day of the Vultures' attack on the stage-coach, three men rode leisurely up the canyon, sought out the hidden trail, and then pushed on to the cabin.

The foremost of the three was Jim Spicer, Buck Danto bringing up the rear, with Powder Phil a captive between them.

"Hyar we aire, Buck," Spicer exclaimed, dismounting at the door.

"That we be, noble dook," airily assented the lesser villain, likewise springing from the saddle.

"Now, le's git ther lad off an' git under kiver, fer ther trick's worked," continued Spicer. "Reckon es how ther major'll be out this way bime-by, w'en we'll spring our leetle game on 'im."

Phil was then taken from the saddle and dragged into the cabin, after which Danto returned to the horses.

Fifteen minutes elapsed ere he reentered the hovel. He crossed the threshold with a bound, instantly wheeling and raising his revolver to a level.

"We're tracked, Jim—git ther whelp out ov ther way!" he enunciated, in fierce, yet guarded, tones.

Upon Spicer, the effect of these words was simply electrical.

The exultant expression faded from his caudacious face, a sickly pallor succeeding it. In an instant he was upon his feet, peering anxiously over Danto's shoulder out into the canyon.

"Tracked!" he breathed, tremulously. "Buck, be ye sure 'twain't Curly?"

"Curly—nothin'! ye fool!" was the savagely-uttered reply. "It was ther Hearse Hercules, Laughing Luke!"

True enough; hidden behind a mass of rock forming an angle in the secret trail was the gigantic driver, his revolvers in hand, his burning eyes fixed on the doorway of the cabin.

Faithful to his self-imposed task—to the strong, yet strange and inexplicable, bands between Powder Phil and himself—he had run the desperados to their lair.

For fully ten minutes Luke maintained his position, patiently awaiting a demonstration of some sort on the part of his foes, aware that they had discovered his presence.

But he awaited in vain. Save the flitting to and fro of shadowy forms beyond the doorway, no sign of life was to be seen or heard.

"Ther skunks! they're holed!" the Hercules finally muttered, with a grimace of disgust.

"They won't venture out till dark—an' I can't git nearer 'thout riskin' a hide full ov bullet-holes."

"As ther feller sez, 'w'ot can't be endured must be cured.' I'm goin' ter find a way ter tackle them cusses putty quick."

The hawk-like eyes of the old scout had been searching the face of the bluff above the cabin while he thus communed with himself, with the result that he decided to make his attack from that quarter.

Confident that Spicer and his ally would not venture from the cabin for a considerable time, Luke cautiously moved away from the rock, keeping under cover, and began the toilsome and perilous ascent of the blights.

Up, up, he toiled, now clinging to a stout shrub, again to a jutting rock, until he had reached his objective point—a ledge, or terrace, some twelve or fifteen feet above the hovel.

Here a surprise awaited him.

Directly above the cabin was a rift in the rock of varying width, leading down into the very heart of the bluff.

As Luke carefully noted this fact, a peculiar expression crept over his face.

"By ther Rockies!" he ejaculated, beneath his breath. "Ya-as, by ther Rockies! I've got ther correct idea ov things at last!"

"Thet cabin down ther aire on'y ther entrance ov a cavern—an' that cavern aire ther hang-out ov Black Boone an' his Vultures!"

Intuitively, the giant scout had arrived at this conclusion, and, confident that it was the correct one, he uttered a sort of triumphant chuckle.

"But how am I to get Phil out ov thar?" he continued the next moment. "Ther hull outfit may be ter bum down thar; an', ag'in, it may not. It's pesky ticklish."

Not long did Luke remain undecided, however. Using every care and precaution, he made speedy preparations to descend into the rift by means of his long lariat.

Perilous as was this feat, he believed it could be accomplished, and, were his theory of the cavern correct, the rescue of Phil would be effected.

For, he reasoned, it was not at all likely that more than two of the band were present, and they, attacked from the rear, could be easily vanquished.

Accordingly, he lowered himself carefully into the jaws of the cleft, then swung slowly downward, hand over hand, anon bracing himself between the narrow walls to note his surroundings.

At a point some fifteen feet below the outer air, the feet of the daring scout encountered a narrow ledge, and he at once saw that his surmise was correct.

The fissure was really an entrance to a cavern of unknown dimensions.

The rocky wall opposite the ledge sloped sharply backward until lost to view in the gray gloom of the abyss.

"Oho! ho!" chuckled Luke, as he peered keenly into the depths. "Oho! ho! I reckoned ther matter about right. In ther next ten minutes ther'll be a s'prise party ov ther fu'st magnitude down thar! If—"

The sentence died at its inception. The low murmur of voices had reached the ears of the old giant, coming, seemingly, from the solid rocks at his back.

Slowly and cautiously he faced about on the narrow ledge, supporting himself with the lariat. Just above his knees he discovered a narrow crevice in the wall, whence came the sound.

Another moment, and he had applied his eyes to the opening. The interior of the cabin against the bluff lay revealed.

The giant spy gave a start of surprise.

"Wa-al, bang me!" he muttered, in disgust. "Ef them measly cusses ain't Jim Spicer an' Buck Danto! Cowardly sneaks, both ov 'em!"

"But whar's Phil? In this cave, I'll be bound!"

Slipping softly off the ledge, he again swung downward, confident that he now held the whip hand of the situation.

The next instant there was a sharp, snapping sound far above. The giant felt the lariat grow limp and yielding in his iron grasp—realized that he was face to face with a most awful peril.

With a groan of horror, he shot swiftly downward through space, utterly powerless to lift even a finger to avert his doom!

CHAPTER XV.

BOLLY DARIT'S "FORLORN HOPES."

"TUMBLE me gently under the car ov Jagernaut, pilgrims an' pards, ef it ain't a classic

shame! Every slab-sided galoot ov 'em struck a bee-line fer his own hole, devil take ther hindmost, leavin' us a-holdin' ther bag. Oh, me! oh, my! it's sick an' tired I am ov ther wiles an' snares ov this sinful, sinful world!"

"Me, too!" lugubriously chimed in Bolly Darrit, as the dolorous strains of Old Dan Rackhoss's voice died away. "Arter this day's work we'd better amble quietly away ter some lone solitude, and shuffle off this hyar mortal coil via ther shortest route. Durn me! it w'u'd save ther fool-killer a tough job."

A vicious punch at the smoldering camp-fire followed the last sentence, and then for the moment silence settled over the little circle.

The pall of night, black and inky with the low-hanging clouds of a gathering storm, hung over the scene, broken only by the glowing embers of the dying fire.

As indicated by the lamentation of Old Dan Rackboss, the pursuit of the Vultures had been fruitless. The outlaws had separated, each man for himself, and late in the afternoon the Invincibles had given up the chase, collected their forces, and returned to their camp of the night before.

They were accompanied by the two detectives, Dick St. Clair and Red Swift.

A feeling of restlessness seemed to pervade the little band. Not only were Laughing Luke and Powder Phil yet absent, but nothing had been seen of their gallant young leader, Little Lightning, since the beginning of his pursuit of Paul Prendle.

The hour was late. Sentries had been posted for the night. Yet the adventuresome spirits showed no signs of seeking sleep.

Kent Kane paced moodily to and fro just beyond the lurid glow of the camp-fire, his head bowed, his arms folded across his chest.

"We're going to have a bad night of it," observed St. Clair, breaking the oppressive silence; "such a night as to make one hungry for a roof and a fire."

"Faith! an' that's fw'at!" exclaimed a member of the circle, suddenly sitting bolt upright. "An' think av ther bboys fw'at 're missin'—av fw'at a howly soakin' they'll be afther resavin'! Musha! it's mesel' as don't ivy them ther purty ructions they may be afther havin'. Ef—"

"Look to your guns, lads—an' out with that fire!" swiftly interpolated Kent Kane, in low, stern tones. "Thar's danger in ther bresh!"

A single instant—then the lithe form of the young Irish ranger shot swiftly forward, his flying feet kicking the burning brands right and left. Simultaneously there was a sharp, rattling sound, telling of a score weapons hastily drawn.

"Ho, there! the camp!" rung out a voice fifty yards away—a voice at once recognized as that of Little Lightning—followed by a peal of rollicking laughter. "Sa-ay, jest a leetle nervous, ain't ye?"

"Sold ag'in!" muttered Bolly Darrit, shoving his weapons back into his belt and sitting down with a grunt. "Derned ef I ain't clean gone—bumfusticated!"

The next moment Little Lightning stood in the midst of his followers.

"Give us a leetle light, pards—right quick, ef ye please. I've got some sort ov a varmint hyar ter examine."

Little need for the request; already a dozen willing hands were collecting the scattered brands, and ere the last word had died away a tiny flame shot up, under the care of Kent Kane himself broadening and brightening until it served to dispel the gloom.

"Not es barnsome es Apoller, nor es slick es a Brummel, by tbunder! but a bad man fer a dark night," muttered Darrit, as his keen eyes swept the face of the young ranger's captive.

"It is Curly Bullock, ' Vigilante'."

True enough; it was Jim Spicer's redoubtable ally.

"You have called ther turn, Bolly," declared Little Lightning, his bright eyes closely searching his captive's sullen, hang-dog countenance.

"Have Phil and Luke made their appearance."

"They are still missing," Kent Kane replied.

Little Lightning stared into the fire a moment, his fine face wearing a thoughtful expression. Then he turned to his brother.

"Take this fellow out ov hearin', Kent," he said. "Putt him under strong guard until we decide what ter do with him."

"If it is decided that my suspicions concernin' him are well-founded, we'll submit his case ter Judge Lynch."

A startled expression crept into Bullock's face—quickly giving way to a look of defiance.

"Jedge Lynch!" he sneered. "Now, look 'e

hyar, young feller, don't ye try any sech funny business as *that* on *me*, fer et won't work.

"I want ye ter understand one or two things right hyar. I ain't no durned tenderfoot—I'm a thoroughbred from 'way back, an' I kin lay out my weight in wil'cats ther wu'st way ye ever see."

"Ya-as, sirree; I'm a chief, I am, an' ef ye don't believe it, I'm comin' right up ter ther scratch ag'in' any man in yer hull outfit ye've a mind ter putt up!"

"When ye come fer ter go ter monkeyin' with a man ov my heft, I reckon as how ye're barkin' up ther wrong tree."

"I'm a Vigilante, an' that's whar ther shoe pinches ye!"

"Hustle him off, Kent!" exclaimed Little Lightning, impatiently. "Mebbe he'll talk in a different strain, by an' by."

Bullock was hurried away.

"Now, pard," continued Little Lightning, "we want ter decide what ter do with that galoot; but first, I'll tell ye how I come ter run ag'in' him."

"To-day, when I putt off after Paul Prendle, I was led a long chase, ther outlaw doubling on his trail an' puttin' back toward Yankee's Find es fast es he c'u'd jump."

"For a long time I kept him in sight; then, within a mile ov camp, I lost sight ov him. His trail led out ter ther Golden Flats road, and thar, ov course, was lost."

"While I was ponderin' ther situation, who shu'd come walkin' along but old Parson Patrock, croonin' a hymn an' lookin' es meek es a dove."

"Ho, thar! parson," I cried, bringin' him up es ef he war shot. "Did ye pass, or see anything ov, Paul Prendle on yer way out from ther Find?"

"Ther old fraud replied that he'd not, an' went on his way, strikin' a key higher in his song."

"I wasn't satisfied, however. I hed a sneakin' sort ov idea that ther parson hed acted almighty strange when I axed him ther question, an' so in less than two minutes I was in the undergrowth alongside ther trail, scoutin' down towards ther camp."

"Not two hundred yards from ther turn in ther trail at which I hed met ther gospel sharp, I made ther biggest kind ov a discovery."

"Parson Patrock an' Paul Prendle was ther same man!"

"Impossible!" ejaculated Kent Kane, who had rejoined the group.

Bolly Darrit uttered a chuckling little laugh.

"It's a fact, though, boyees," he declared, his gray eyes twinkling shrewdly. "I diskivered some days ago that ther parson was a colossal fraud, a mountainous humbug, a monumental deceiver—an' on'y fer that I'd never 'a' got out ov ther ole hearse alive this mornin'!"

"But go on, ye fresh young paralytic stroke—w'ot next!"

"Well, as was natural, I started in pursuit ov Patrock," continued Little Lightning, with glowing eyes: "but ag'in he evaded me, an' after a long tramp I was forced ter own up that I was beaten—outwitted."

"Then I went back ter ther scene ov ther attack on ther hearse, an' scouted around in ther vicinity fer some hours. At nightfall I headed this way, as we hed agreed ter make this spot our headquarters during ther campaign ag'in' ther Vultures."

"An' it was on ther way hyar that I met with ther most singular adventure ov ther day."

"I was within half a mile ov ther camp—just about ther place Phil an' I run onter ther Vigilantes this mornin'!"—with a glance at Kent—"when all at once ther most fearful yell I ever heard rung out within a dozen paces ov me."

"I treed, quick—sart'in that I had run ag'in' a nest ov red-skins; but in less'n a minute I discovered what ther trouble really was."

"An' that is how I found Bullock—trussed up ter a tree, an' groanin' an' goin' on as only a man scared half ter death w'u'd ever do."

"From his wild talk, I was led ter suspect that Phil had come ter grief, an' that Laughing Luke was accountable for Bullock's predicament; but not a word could I get out ov ther rascal after I'd made my presence known."

"So I decided ter bring him into camp, see how matters stood, and then, if necessary, make him talk."

"In which ye did ther kerrect thing," Bolly Darrit averred, nodding his head approvingly. "After ther feller learns how matters stand in regard ter ther Vigilantes an' ther Vultures, he'll be a consarned idiot ef he don't make a clean breast ov it ter buy himself off."

"The wrinkle is certainly worth trying," St. Clair observed.

"Oh, yes; and it will be a success, too," declared Red Swift. "The fellow is an ordinary rascal, and if the proper pressure is brought to bear upon him he'll tell all he knows."

"Fetch ther galoot up, an' then jest leave ther matter ter me," exclaimed Darrit, scrambling to his feet and setting to work on a lariat.

A circle was quickly formed, and into it Curly Bullock was led and placed to face the old detective.

One glance at the stern, determined faces of the boy brigade would have dismayed a stouter heart than that of the captive outlaw.

"Curly Bullock," exclaimed Darrit, holding the coiled lasso with the noosed end prominently in view, "we, constitootin' ther court ov Judge Lynch, hev found ye guilty on two counts."

"The fu'st is, that ye are a member ov Black Boone's road-agent band, ther Vultures."

"Secondly, that ye hed a band in gettin' away with our young pard, Powder Phil, this mornin'."

"Ther decree ov Judge Lynch hes bin that ye are ter be hanged—hanged by ther neck until ye are dead."

"Now, Curly Bullock, ef ye hev any defense ter offer, make good use ov yer time."

The grim visage of the desperado changed not a particle, save that a defiant smile slowly wreathed his lips.

"Oh, yes! I suppose ye've got it all fixed up es neat es a new pin," he observed, not a trace of alarm or annoyance noticeable in his voice. "It means jest this. I've got ter peach it all, or stand trial later on in ther criminal courts."

"Ye overlook ther fact that I'm onto ye, Bolly Darrit, an' consequently see through yer little game! Bolly Darrit an' Judge Lynch are not friends!"

"But I'm no hog. I'm in a bad scrape an' I know it. I'm goin' ter take ther shortest cut ter get out."

"Jest name yer conditions, will ye?"

"Nerve—monumental gall! Dern me! ef I ever see ther ekil ov it afore!" muttered Old Dan Rackhoss, catching his breath in well-simulated astonishment.

A smile of extreme beatitude slowly spread over the rubicund visage of Darrit.

"Wa-al! ye're sensible, whatever yer faults," he observed; "an' I reckon ye've got matters down jest about right—except that ye're either go scot free, or hang right byar."

"I've your word fer that—that ef I talk I am ter be released—hev I, Bolly Darrit?"

"Exactly; at sunrise ye shall go, free an' unharmed."

"Then hyar goes!" and slowly and deliberately the desperado narrated, first, all that he knew concerning the Vultures, then the details of the plot against Phil.

A searching cross-examination failed to show any attempt at evasion or concealment.

The old detective was silent for a moment after Bullock had been led away and again placed under guard.

"Boyees!" he exclaimed, at length, starting as if from a reverie, "thar'st jist a forlorn hope ef ye're gamy enough ter undertake the rifle."

"I remember ther location ov Jack Cobden's cabin, an' ther secret trail by which it is reached."

"But, ef we strike, we must at once. What say ye?"

In an instant, every lad was again upon his feet, eager for the perilous expedition. Ten minutes later, and the boy brigade was filing silently through the woods, accompanied by their friends, the detectives, all intent on forcing a speedy realization of Bolly Darrit's "forlorn hope."

CHAPTER XVI.

PAST AND PRESENT—DELLA'S PERIL.

RETURN we now, for a brief space to Old Frosty, the magnate of Yankee's Find.

Detected in his daring attempt to learn the plans of his arch-enemy, Major Jordan, and set upon and choked into insensibility by that worthy and Don McVay, as narrated in a preceding chapter, it was hours before the mine-owner regained consciousness to a degree sufficient to take cognizance of his surroundings.

Then, it was to find himself lying at full length on the cold, damp stone floor of a cavern, bound and gagged, utterly helpless, wholly at the mercy of his unscrupulous foes.

Bitter were his thoughts, his emotions, as a full realization of his predicament swept through his feverish brain.

Proud, arrogant, domineering, the indignity put upon him seemed more than he could bear. Savagely he struggled to free himself, straining,

at his bonds with giant strength; vainly, for the stout thongs had been knotted by a master-hand.

A paroxysm of violent rage succeeded his futile efforts, bringing him to the verge of complete mental exhaustion.

Fortunately, perhaps, for Handy, an incident wholly unexpected just at that juncture diverted his mind from the maddening subject.

A grating, rasping sound echoed through the cavern, and a section of the stone wall some yards away seemed to slip aside, throwing a belt of grayish light into the gloom of the place.

In the aperture thus created there appeared, a moment later, the forms of two men, one behind the other. No second glance was needed to reveal to Austin Handy their identity.

The first was Powder Phil, his bands pinioned to his back. The other was Jim Spicer.

Stiddy now, ye cantankerous cuss!" growled the latter, as he paused to shove the stone back into place.

"Don't worry yourself," retorted the young miner, as he made a deliberate survey of his surroundings. "So, here is where I'm to avoid the coming of the gallant major, is it?"

Spicer vouchsafed no reply. Having satisfied himself that the stone was in its correct position, he conducted his captive some distance back into the cave, halting in a dark alcove.

It was some minutes before the outlaw reappeared, alone, and passed out into the cabin.

"Heavens!" mused Old Frosty, a shiver of horror creeping over his attenuated body. "Heavens! can that desperado have murdered the lad? Is that the outcome of my plotting?"

"But no—the end is not yet! Phil spoke of the coming of the major, and while there is life there is hope. The lad shall not die if money can effect his release!"

"And Della!—what of her? Has this infamous—"

The sentence ended unfinished in the brain of the captive mine-owner. His eyes suddenly filled with the contending lights of hope and fear.

Far above, in the jaws of a narrow fissure, through which filtered just a trace of the light of day, swayed and swung a gigantic form—the form of a man, descending slowly through mid-air—in sharp outline against the pale gray sky.

In almost breathless suspense, Austin Handy watched the patient, plodding progress of this daring spy—noted each pause, however slight, with a feeling akin to despair, hope beating high in his breast with each renewal of the descent.

Down—down, hand over hand, crept the Hercules; a moment of feverish anxiety—then he swung clear of the narrow walls into the cavern.

The old mine-owner trembled in every fiber. His breath came quick and hard. Escape, with vengeance against his foes, seemed almost assured.

Then came a rending, snapping sound far up the fissure—a short, sharp cry of alarm. The next instant the reckless spy lay in a lifeless heap on the rocky floor of the cavern!

From the heart of Austin Handy arose a groan of horror and absolute despair. His new-born hopes had been dashed to earth!

For hours he lay there, awaiting—he knew not what. His mind, naturally enough, was freighted with dire forebodings; and yet, his thought turned from the present and the future, to dwell upon the past, to which the lifeless form a few paces distant seemed intangibly linked.

"Great God! it is meet that I should suffer!" he groaned, his breath coming in short hard gasps, while great drops of perspiration oozed from every pore. "Others suffered by my hand, and this is retribution!"

"Oh, could I undo that first great wrong—recall that evil October day—make just and full retribution to Howard Atherton and his wife and child, then I might die in peace!"

"But, no; not the least of these can I do, for the golden opportunity is passed. I even drove the son from my presence and from the camp!"

"Little wonder is it that Howard's blood-stained face haunts me now, after all these years—that it is before me as distinctly as on that October morning he gave his life for mine on Nebraska's plains."

"Better had I died! Ah!—"

"Austin Handy! Austin Handy! seek my wife and child, and tell them all!"

In deep, sepulchral tones the words vibrated through the cavern, chilling the mine-owner with sudden horror. Well he remembered the words—knew the voice!

"God! it is he! It is Howard Atherton!"

The thought surged through his brain like fire. His eyes seemed bursting from their sockets, while his veins stood out like whip-cords. A giant's strength filled his limbs, snapping asunder the stout thongs like so many threads in the hands of a child! He was free—unfettered!

An instant, and he was upon his feet, his teeth hard-set to repress a shriek of dismay. Confronting him was the herculean spy, Laughing Luke, his face grimed and blood-stained, a strange light in his big gray eyes.

"Hol Austin Handy! it is you!" the latter exclaimed, in low, deep tones, his beaming orbs fixing themselves upon the face of the mine-owner. "I am Howard Atherton!"

"What have you done with my wife and boy?"

An exclamation of satisfaction escaped Major Jordan as he noted the presence of Dahlgren and his followers in the cabin.

"Ha! pards! you are gathered here on time," he cried, striding forward and placing Della Handy upon a rude cot in one corner.

A harsh laugh broke from Dahlgren's lips.

"Yes; but I reckon, major, that we're lucky ter hev got hyar at all," he responded. "It war tetch an' go, with thet cadarence ov young wil-cats headed by Bolly Darrit at our heels."

"I inferred as much, from the report Prendle brought of the attack on the coach to-day," answered Major Jordan, taking his stand beside McVay before the glowing fire. "I suspect, too, that the Vigilantes have ceased to be one of the features of Yankee's Find?"

"That's wot! Nary a galoot ov us kin go moseyin' 'round that camp any more!"

"Well, odds the difference! The game's played, so far as Old Frosty's bullion is concerned, and after to-night you can give the Golden Flats trail a wide berth."

"Eh?"

"The magnate has abdicated—gone East on a business trip of indefinite length, you know—and left me to manage his affairs in his absence. Hereafter I'll look after the safe transfer of the bullion, in person."

Figuratively speaking, Dark Dahlgren pricked up his ears.

"You are goin' back ter the Find?" he asked.

"Certainly—to-morrow night."

"An' ther gal hyar—Miss Della?"

"Returns as Mrs. Jordan!"

"Oh! Ah! ya-as!" and the desperado's jaw fell in sheer astonishment. "Come out ter git spliced, I s'pose?"

"Exactly! the parson there accompanied us expressly to tie the knot."

"A weddin', hey?" cried Dahlgren, a broad grin overspreading his dusky face. "Whoop'er up, pards—we'll celebrate ther event in ginooin' bob-royal style!"

The Vultures nodded their approval, dazed by the very boldness of Jordan's stroke.

Meanwhile, Don McVay stood silent and preoccupied, his piercing eyes fixed in a steady gaze, half-wistfully, half-suspiciously, on Parson Patrock.

That thin little scoundrel had seated himself upon a rough stool, in a darkened corner, and, with his poncho drawn well up over his head and shoulders, seemed more than half-asleep.

"There's but one chance in ten thousand!" gritted the gambler, madly, yet silently, through his hard-set teeth, his eyes suddenly flaming with a determined light. "But that chance, desperate as it is, must be taken!"

And drawing his wraps about his head and face, he strode from the cabin out into the reeking darkness.

"Stiddy, now, lads—an' mum's ther word, for ther gospel-sharp aire takin' his place an' ther ceremony aire a go! My! 'tain't often we go inter s'ciety, but when we do—"

Dark Dahlgren's husky words broke off in a villainous chuckle, caught up and echoed by the members of the band ranged along the foot of the bluff at the back of the hovel.

Near the center of the dismal place stood Major Fordyce Jordan, supporting Della Handy.

The beautiful face of the girl was deathlike in it pallor—her eyes heavy and lusterless.

Confronting the devilish plotter and his victim stood Parson Patrock, his head and face completely muffled—just as he had risen from the stool.

"Speak, parson, for we are ready," commanded Major Jordan.

"Just a mon. ent—"

The door behind the parson suddenly opened, breaking in upon his husky tones, and the cloaked and muffled form of Don McVay swiftly crossed the threshold.

"Just in time!" cried Jordan.

"Just in time Don!" muttered the gambler, in hoarse, strained accents.

A strange hush followed the words—a hush broken at length by the voice of Major Jordan, saying impatiently:

"Proceed, Patrock—have you lost the use of your tongue?"

Not a sound was vouchsafed in response.

Reaching forward, the major with a deft motion plucked aside the mysterious poncho, suspicion written in every line of his handsome face.

A false beard and a wig, dislodged by the action, fell to the floor! The pale, care-worn features of the Widow Atherton were revealed!

Her right hand, raised to a level with Major Jordan's heart, clutched a cocked revolver!

"Tricked!" hissed the villain, his face ashen in his wrath.

"Yes, tricked, Sharper Hidefast!" enunciated the tall form at the door, in keen, incisive strains.

Major Jordan reeled back a pace.

"What mean you, Don McVay?" he demanded, hoarsely.

A mocking laugh—a sudden uplifting of his hands, and the intruder stood exposed—not as Don McVay, but as Red Swift, the Indian Sleuth! Then—

"I mean that you are my prisoner—that in the name of the law I arrest you for the murder of young Corbin Handy—that I am here to avenge the death of my pard, Hawkshaw, the detective!"

"And we are here to avenge ourselves—to see that justice is done!"

The voice was that of Powder Phil.

He, with Laughing Luke and Austin Handy, stood just beyond the Vigilantes, in the mouth of a dark passage leading back into the heart of the bluff. In the hands of each was a leveled "six."

Truly, the climax had come!

CHAPTER XVII.

HOW IT ENDED.

THE events just narrated had crowded upon each other so swiftly as almost to daze the members of the road-agent band. True, their hands sought their weapons at the first note of alarm; but no demonstration, offensive or defensive, had followed the action. All were mute, motionless—nothing if not astounded.

For a minute not a sound, save the soughing of the wind without and the soft, monotonous patter of the rain overhead, broke the deadly silence.

Then, Dark Dahlgren, catching his breath hard, managed to ejaculate:

"Wa-all may I be hanged!"

"An' ye jest will, Bullion Bill, alias Black Boone alias Dark Dahlgren—if ye live long enough!" declared a voice, unmistakably that of the veteran detective, Bolly Darrit, from the open door. "Stiddy, now, ye engrateful rapscallions! Don't attempt ter draw—it'll be ther death-warrant ov every man ov ye! Ther hull cadarence ov Invincibles is right at my back!"

True enough; the frowning muzzles of a dozen rifles stared the discomfited desperadoes full in the face! A move toward resistance would only invoke a perfect hail of lead—a storm of devastation and death.

"I'll risk ther rope!" Dark Dahlgren declared, mechanically lifting his empty hands—an example at once followed by the entire outlaw clan, save one.

That one was Major Jordan. Suddenly releasing his hold upon the arm of Della Handy, he lunged forward at Red Swift, a long, keen knife in his outstretched hand.

But the Indian sleuth was on the alert. His revolver cracked sharply, and Major Jordan's arm fell helpless to his side, broken by a well-directed ball.

The next instant the intrepid man-hunter was upon his quarry—just as Della Handy reeled into the open arms of Mrs. Atherton.

Three minutes later, and the last of the Vultures had been disarmed and secured, a sweeping victory perching upon the banners of our friends.

"Tell me, mother, how you came to be here in the guise of Parson Patrock to-night," Powder Phil requested, as he drew Mrs. Atherton

and Della Handy gently aside, immediately after the wholesale arrest had been accomplished.

"All through an accident to the real Parson Patrock, my son," was the ready answer. "Shortly before midnight I was aroused by a cry of distress a short distance from the cabin, and, going out, I found Paul Prendle, the Vigilante, rapidly bleeding to death from a re-opened wound.

"He lived but a few minutes—scarcely long enough to make a confession of his crimes—yet he managed to tell me that a plot was afoot against Della; that I could thwart it by donning the disguise in his saddle-bags, mounting his horse and going to the three pines near Austin Handy's house, where I would be joined by Major Jordan and Don McVay, the principals of the plot."

"I followed his suggestions, and went to the place designated, in the guise of Parson Patrock. The two schemers were already there, and rated me roundly for the delay my tardiness had caused them.

"No sooner had I discovered the nature of their project than I determined to thwart them by raising an alarm; but my purpose seemed to be suspected, so closely was I watched, and I was compelled to give over the idea.

"That, in brief, is the explanation of my presence here."

"A brave act, but one that might have cost you your life," commented Phil, with glowing eyes. "And now, mother, I have news of a startling and most unexpected nature to impart.

"Father lives!"

"Lives! Merciful Powers!"

"Diana!"

Laughing Luke uttered the name, his deep tones tremulous with emotion.

Mrs. Atherton cast a swift, searching look at the rugged, noble face of the Hercules. A sudden dash of color appeared in either pallid cheek, to recede as quickly as it had come. Then:

"Howard!"

Just the one word in joy-thrilled tones, ere she fainted in the outstretched arms.

By no means the least interested spectator of the little scene just described was Austin Handy—"Old Frosty"—and there was just a trace of a suspicious moisture in his keen blue eyes as he walked briskly up to Philip, who was just then rapidly becoming oblivious of all else under the witching smile of the magnate's ward.

With a hastily-uttered excuse, Handy drew Della aside a moment. What passed between the two is of small moment here. Suffice it to say that he led her back to Phil, a few moments later, and placed their hands together, saying, brokenly:

"Take her, my lad, and may Heaven bless you both! You will think of me sometimes; let it be with charity and forbearance."

That was all. Before his purpose could be divined, he was out of the cabin—lost to view in the darkness—gone forever. Whatever had been the enormity of his breach of faith and trust against Howard Atherton, the latter found on his return to Yankee's Find that it had been scrupulously amended, late as was the day.

Little remains to be said.

Howard Atherton, his mental faculties fully restored, yet lives to enjoy the fruits of his early-life career as a gold-seeker, while Phil is in full control of the Bonanza King Mine.

Major Jordan, or better, Sharper Hidefast, with Don McVay, was taken back to Ohio, where they were sentenced to long terms in the penitentiary for the murder of young Corbin Handy. The assassination of Hawkshaw, the detective, fastened upon Hidefast before St. Clair and Red Swift left Yankee's Find, insures that villain anything but smooth-sailing after the expiration of his present term.

Dark Dahlgren, the Vigilante-Vulture chief, is likewise behind prison bars, sent there by the indomitable Bolly Darrit. As for the other members of the band, none escaped just and due punishment except Curly Bullock, who was released according to promise.

Little Lightning and his Prairie Invincibles continue to roam the West, perfect terrors to evil-doers.

THE END.

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